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"EVERY DECISION YOU MAKE WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON ITS STORY"

BEN MANSILL

This month
Hand-delivered a copy of PC PowerPlay magazine to a subscriber located deep within the Carpathian Mountains. Hasn't been seen since. Ah, he'll be fine...

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Check out our latest offer!
SEE p32

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt has a now legendary reputation, with the dark fantasy action-RPG going down in history as one of gaming's greatest of all time releases. Now, *The Witcher 3*'s director, along with his new studio, Rebel Wolves, is creating a new dark fantasy action-RPG, and we couldn't be more hyped for it.

The Blood of Dawnwalker promises a lore-rich, cinematic narrative world in which every decision you make will have an impact on its mature, engrossing story. It sounds incredible, and you can get the inside scoop starting on page 40.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

ROBIN VALENTINE

This month
Toured PC PowerPlay Towers with his one-man improv show, Valentine's Day. It closed on opening night.

IAN EVENDEN

This month
Was made curator of the PCPP Towers museum. Argued with Murray the Demonic Skull over pay.

LAUREN MORTON

This month
Commanded tiny people to poop in small bathrooms. Oh, and in *The Sims 4* she...

KARA PHILLIPS

This month
Plotted mischief with her motley crew of malefactor minions. Stole Monster Munch.

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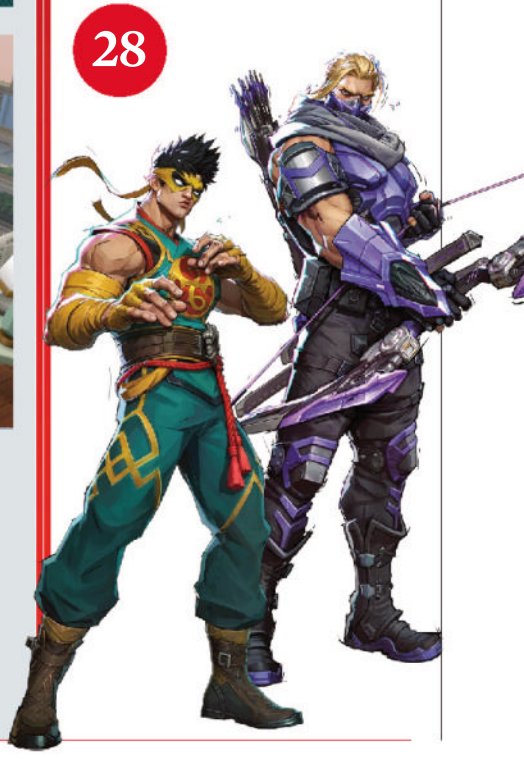
The art of designing and building tiny houses in *The Sims 4*.



Fallout is, of course, one of the bloodiest games out there.

THE OLD ULTRAVIOLENCE

Fallout's co-creator says only we can stop videogame bloodshed

After thousands of hours spent in combat with orcs, androids and enemy militants, it's become harder to find novelty in videogame violence. While Steam overflows with trucks, farms and city builders for when I've grown battle-weary, violence remains the mode of interaction, even in triple-A RPGs that tout player freedom. *Fallout* co-creator Tim Cain says that's not going to change as long as we all keep buying it.

In a YouTube video that went public on New Year's Day, Cain responded to a viewer who asked whether he thinks we'll ever see triple-A RPGs move beyond violence as the default way for players to interact with the world. Cain's answer was simple: big-budget RPGs will centre combat as long as combat sells. "Companies make games – and in general, products – that people will buy," Cain said. "That's it. It means games that sell the most, and I'm not even talking about review the best, just sell the most, will dictate future games."

BIG-BUDGET RPGS WILL CENTRE COMBAT AS LONG AS COMBAT SELLS

Cain said action-RPGs like *Diablo*, broadly speaking, tend to outsell CRPGs that might feature more dialogue in part because combat is simpler to market. "When you watch a trailer and you see people actually doing things – jumping, climbing, shooting, punching – it looks like, 'Whoa! Look at all the things you can do in that game,'" Cain said. As a point of comparison, Cain explained that during his time as game director on *The Outer Worlds*, Obsidian ran into

NEXT-GEN GRAPHICS

BLACKWELL IS HERE

Nvidia announced its first 50-series graphics cards, and the DLSS 4 tech they can use should, according to the GPU giant, multiply framerates by up to 8x over traditional rendering. This is probably what allows them to claim the RTX 5070 will offer RTX 4090 performance. ■ *JF*

BACK IN BLOCK

MINECRAFT SUCCESSOR?

Minecraft's creator Markus 'Notch' Persson has shared that his next game will be a spiritual successor to *Minecraft*, even though the project started as a roguelike. But after asking his X followers what they want, *Minecraft 2* was the answer, so that's what the people will get. ■ *KP*

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

OBLIVION WE DESERVED

Some *Morrowind* modders have been making the parts of the province that Bethesda didn't get to for 25 years now. So, they took a break... in order to make *Oblivion* instead. *Project Cyrodiil* is a quest to make *Oblivion*'s home region in *Morrowind*, and its first expansion is out now. ■ *JW*

TOP: He's OK, folks!

ABOVE: Games filled with combat are easier to market.

difficulties finding a marketing strategy that would highlight its non-combat elements in preview trailers

DRAW THE LINE

"How do we show that this game has a really good story? How do we show that it has fantastic dialogue? How do you do that in a trailer that may only be 15 or 30 seconds long?" Cain said. "You have to reduce this wonderful narrative that's super creative and nuanced that has a huge arc down to a soundbite."

But Cain urged viewers not to feel like voting with their wallets is useless, "It's just one of those things that you have to draw the line somewhere and everyone draws it in a different spot."

I think we'd all have to draw a pretty thick line to make a noticeable mark on the market share when those multimillion dollar marketing budgets are in play. Cain seems more optimistic, however, that "companies will listen" if enough players decide they'd like a bit less combat, please.

"To not draw a line because you think it won't matter is a way to guarantee it won't matter," Cain said. "It's like when people say, 'I don't vote because my one vote won't matter.' Once enough people think that way, it matters." ■

Lincoln Carpenter

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Critical hit
Larian's Swen Vincke called out the game industry and told it to start putting devs and players first.

Power through
Underselling indie game *Endlight* is putting out 20 seasons of content.

Royal flush
Balatro has absorbed eight new crossovers in its quest to turn all videogames into playing cards.

Busted flush
PEGI won't budge *on Balatro*'s 18+ rating, despite games with actual gambling getting lower age limits.

Belongs in a museum
Did you get a free *Indiana Jones* key from Humble? No you didn't: the storefront revoked them all even if you already redeemed yours.

Where there's smoke...
Banned *CoD* players are in uproar about its new bong gun. Hmm.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is a master of many things. Upside down kisses in the rain. Extreme tiddlywinks. Whoopee cushion placement. You name it, The Spy has an accomplishment badge sewn onto The Spy's pants for it.

The Spy is also a master of perceiving strange ripples in the PC game industry continuum. Odd, beguiling, metaphysical patterns that seem to hint at, tantalisingly, a greater force at play in the PC gaming industry than even his most holy of holies, Lord Gaben. Cthulu is a distinct possibility, of course. The Spy is well acquainted with the The Great Dreamer's mischief. But, no. More likely... the fates, perhaps, weaving their web? The Spy saw them once, you know, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. At ancient Sicycon they were, spinning the fates of PC gamers, for Leeroy Jenkins was always destined to go solo. This was as inevitable as the turning of the world.

A recent perturbation in the continuum detected by The Spy is the current fate of Arkane Lyon, the France-based sister studio to the, as of May last year, shuttered former great Arkane Austin, the studio behind such critically acclaimed single-player action-adventure immersive sim games as *Dishonored* and *Prey*. Arkane Austin was known as a master of the genre.

However, following Microsoft's acquisition of Arkane Studios, Arkane Austin then announced it was working on *Redfall*, the now infamous live-service, online co-operative multiplayer shooter that bombed so hard at release it led to refunds being issued. Within the same month of the game being released, Microsoft then shuttered Arkane Austin. Why a studio that had excelled at one type of game would then make a totally different kind of live-service, multiplayer game remains a mystery. Although The Spy can have a damn good guess.

THE SPY
Last night The Spy dreamt that The Spy went to Manderlay again.

OPEN SEASON ON SUCKHEADS

Which is why it feels just a little bit odd to The Spy that, right now, Arkane Lyon (*Dishonored*, *Deathloop*), the surviving branch of Arkane Studios, is working on *Marvel's Blade*, an upcoming action-adventure game that, according to secret pitch documents and concept art seen by The Spy, is a standalone title and much more aligned to Arkane's usual output.

Aside from a notable switch from Arkane's familiar first-person perspective, with *Marvel's Blade* being a third-person perspective action-adventure title, The Spy has purloined plenty of other positive signs of this return to alignment. In terms of narrative, the game is set in Paris, France, where Eric 'Blade' Brooks is dispatched to deal with a congregation of vampires who have taken over a large portion of the city.

VAMPIRES HAVE TAKEN OVER A LARGE PORTION OF THE CITY

Further, The Spy can report that, after eavesdropping on Arkane's studio director, Dinga Bakaba, deep within Arkane's Lyon-based headquarters, *Marvel's Blade* is a 'narrative-driven, immersive, third-person' experience and a 'very Arkane game'. In addition, while in Arkane's HQ The Spy spotted that both Dana Nightingale and Sebastien Mitton, two devs who had a large hand in the *Dishonored* series, were both working on *Marvel's Blade*, as campaign director and art director respectively.

Is this a sign of the PC gaming industry righting itself? Only the fates know for sure. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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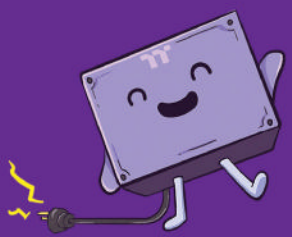

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

ENIX EXPECTATIONS

The success of rival JRPG series highlights FINAL FANTASY's struggles

"Who is *Final Fantasy* for these days?" is a question without an obvious answer, but it's one that Square Enix must reckon with. *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* and *Final Fantasy XVI* failed to meet sales expectations according to Square's own financial report, creating a whirlwind of takes on why, and *Final Fantasy*'s future in general.

What seems clear is that the era of *Final Fantasy* as the Japanese role-playing game series that comes to mind when the genre comes up has ended. That's not to say no new *Final Fantasy* will fly off shelves, but the last 15 years have shown that it is, more often than not, selling a few million copies per game rather than 10 million-plus, like *Final Fantasy XV* managed. Which means that the issue has at least as much to do with Square's expectations as those of fans or potential fans.

Despite this, Japanese RPGs are thriving. Nihon Falcom never had the massive international breakout of Square nor Enix in the 1980s or '90s, but it's seeing unprecedented success now with its tentpole franchise, *Trails*, owing to the massive growth in the series' popularity outside of Japan.

Atlus' *Persona* games used to sell just a few hundred thousand copies, but *Persona 5* has become an institution unto itself – with over 12 million sales between its releases and spin-offs. Sega switched its long-running *Yakuza* (now *Like a Dragon*) games from beat 'em up adventures to RPGs akin to *Dragon Quest*; they've only become more popular. *Dragon Quest* itself outsold every other 2024 game in Japan in one week with a 2D remake.

JRPGs are doing very well, even if elements of the genre are now more ubiquitous than the genre itself. Part of what made *Final Fantasy* stand out at its peak was that JRPGs weren't as widely accepted: many of the games you think of as classics weren't selling like *Final Fantasy*, or only sold well in Japan.

Final Fantasy managed to be cutting edge with its storytelling, with its visuals, with its tendency to experiment and forcibly evolve the genre in a way that broke through to the mainstream more regularly than any other Japanese RPG franchise.

The first six *Final Fantasy* games were released between 1987 and 1994. The PlayStation had three in four years. Since then the escalating cost and length of development for each new entry has meant fewer games that take forever to make and evolve less, as *Final Fantasy* begins to play more like existing popular game to maintain mainstream attention.

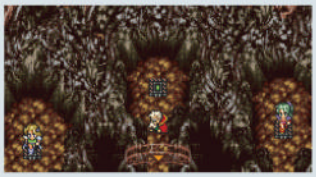
Meanwhile, Falcom's pumping out *Trails* games despite massive scripts, interconnected storytelling that resembles

Shrinking Fantasy

Square Enix's various HD-2D games and franchises like *Bravely Default* are comparatively smaller experiences that have picked up much of the classic *Final Fantasy* feel, while that series grows in size and scope. Modern Square has shown itself capable of thriving at this scale; what would happen if it attempted to make an actual *Final Fantasy* in this style again?

LEFT: You can familiarise yourself with so many NPCs who have nothing to do with the main story of *Trails* games that returning to this world feels like seeing an old friend again.

GRAPHICAL SHOWCASE *Final Fantasy historically pushes the hardware it's on*



XVI-BIT GLORY
Final Fantasy VI's character sprites had one consistent size, separating them visually from past Square RPGs.

FINAL FANTASY 3D
Final Fantasy VII introduced CG cutscenes, which helped players form closer connections to the characters.

FINAL FANTASY, NOW IN HD
The shift to high definition meant even more detailed cutscenes and characters – Lightning's design is beautiful.

FINAL FANTASY, NOW EVEN MORE HD
Square Enix clearly spent considerable time on *Final Fantasy XVI*'s visuals.

fantasy novels more than games, and huge, deep worlds. There have been 13 in the series' first 20 years – in the same stretch, *Final Fantasy* got from *FFXII* to *FFXVI*. *Like a Dragon* is switching back-and-forth between action spin-offs and its much lengthier mainline RPGs, never leaving fans wanting or waiting for the next adventure.

One of the open secrets here is Falcom and Sega's comfort with reusing assets and locations. No one is going to criticise the production values of *Like a Dragon* games, and *Trails* has seen obvious boosts to production value, too. These franchises happily return to old art and game structures, leaving plenty of development time and budget to focus on justifying another trip down familiar roads.

You know what you're getting into when you start a *Trails*, *Like a Dragon*, *Dragon Quest* or *Persona* game. You can explain exactly what these games are to someone showing interest.

FRANCHISES HAPPILY RETURN TO OLD ART AND GAME STRUCTURES

Trails won't outsell *Final Fantasy*, but it's not budgeted to, and neither is *Like a Dragon*. Neither fails to evolve or grow. 2024's *Trails through Daybreak* mixed action RPG elements into its turn-based setup for a new strategic blend that will also be used in the upcoming *Trails in the Sky* remake. But in the same way a *Dragon Quest* game is always clearly a *Dragon Quest* game, they're telling different and new stories with changing mechanics. Balancing consistency with new ideas has fostered smaller, dedicated fanbases that have their publishers thrilled, their expectations met or exceeded.

It's hard to see the same lineage or consistency with modern *Final Fantasy*. Square titled a kinda-sequel reimagining of a beloved game *Remake* for meta wordplay reasons; it's the first of three remakes, all of which have drastically different gameplay from the original. That's fine! But expectations should be better set for that sort of project. There are a few reasons the middle entry of the trilogy might not sell as well as the first: playing so differently from the original, or the remake only being 2/3 finished, or the dramatic shift towards an Ubisoft-esque open-world experience.

As with *Final Fantasy XVI*, PlayStation 5 exclusivity didn't help matters. Going multiplatform won't solve the identity crisis, however, one worsened by *FFXVI*'s switch to action RPG.

RETAIN THAT QUALITY

Final Fantasy is not what it once was, culturally, but it can still retain that quality. Square needs to take a lesson from the thriving franchises around it and figure out just what *Final Fantasy* is supposed to be, like with *Trails* and *Like a Dragon*. Each of their sequels push their respective envelopes without betraying expectations, and are available on less powerful hardware.

Maybe *Final Fantasy* doesn't need to be as big of a production anymore – to reflect the fact that it is, as a phenomenon, not as big as it used to be. Maybe that change would better define the series and who is even interested in it, all while allowing room for the experimentation that helped make *Final Fantasy* what it was in the first place. ■

Marc Normandin

Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 REVO

Sega's iconic versus fighter arrives on PC after 20 years

Courtesy of the Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, the talented devs behind the long-running *Yakuza* series, Sega is finally bringing *Virtua Fighter 5* to PC, and it's doing so in its *Ultimate Showdown* version, which is the latest update released in Japan and the game that is still played in Japanese arcades today.

Under the stewardship of Masayoshi Yokoyama, *Virtua Fighter 5 REVO* arrives on PC using Ryu Ga Gotoku's in-house Dragon Engine, which is the engine used in all *Yakuza* games. As a result, max resolution has been lifted to 4K, while 60fps is guaranteed. The game's netcode for online battles has also been reworked and tested, promising to bring a "new level" of multiplayer action.

DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI
Marco is an expert on the Japanese gaming industry, having reported on its PC, console and arcade industry since 1996. Not many people know this, but when he's not delivering world-exclusive scoops for PCPP, he's directing Motoko Kusanagi as chief of Public Security Section 9.

When playing the game's beta, the series' typical speed and dynamism is very evident, but also mutated to be more aggressive and immediate, evocative of *Tekken 8*'s Rage and Heat system. The control system hasn't required a big overhaul either as, unlike other fighting series, *Virtua Fighter*'s creator Yu Suzuki (the Japanese dev behind famous games like *Out Run* and *Shenmue*), designed it as a simplified three-button-only system, with only guard, punch and kick on offer.

MAX RESOLUTION HAS BEEN LIFTED TO 4K WHILE 60FPS IS GUARANTEED

REVO is clearly the first attempt from Sega in nearly 20 years to get into the esports market, but also to act as a testbed for *Virtua Fighter 6*, which is already in development. Technically the specs to run *REVO* are very accessible, with just an Intel Core i5-7600/AMD Ryzen 3 1300X and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 1050Ti/AMD Radeon RX 570 required to run the game.

Aside from the regular version of the game, there's also a 30th anniversary edition that will include all the music from the previous games, as well as art from pre-production of the series' first iconic chapter, among other things. *REVO* is officially available from January 27, 2025, only on Steam.

shorturl.at/ZvTol

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Square-Enix speeds up its departure from PS5 exclusives

We said it on these pages back in December 2024 that Japanese publishers are abandoning Sony's exclusives policy, and Square Enix's president Takashi Kiryu truly showed it off last month when, in front of the whole world at The Game Awards, he announced without any prior notice that Final *Fantasy VII Rebirth* will be available for PC this month.

The second instalment of the everlasting JRPG saga sees the remake trilogy continue under the guidance of Yoshinori Kitase and Tetsuya Nomura.

Rebirth picks up the *FFVII Remake* story, following hero Cloud Strife and his companions, after they escape from the dystopian city of Midgar and proceed on an epic adventure across the planet while pursuing series antagonist Sephiroth. Expect plenty of action, as well as chocobo riding.

Recommended system specs are an Intel Core i7-8700/AMD Ryzen 5 5600 and a GeForce RTX 2070/Radeon RX 6700 XT. Available from Jan 23, 2025.
shorturl.at/w0DB5

TALES OF GRACES F REMASTERED

The Wii's best-selling JRPG arrives on PC

Considered by Famitsu to be one of the best games of all time, *Tales of Graces* is the foremost chapter of this long-running JPRG saga. The *Tales* series has been Namco's response to the RPG genre for, literally, decades, but *Tales of Graces* was initially released in Japan only on Wii. However, its stratospheric sales, forced Bandai Namco to release it for the PS3 too, which saw its sales top almost 200,000.

And now, due to a new-found focus on PC gaming within the Japanese gaming industry, Bandai Namco is releasing the remastered version of *Tales of Graces* for PC, too.

Minimum specs start at an Intel Core i3-8100/AMD Ryzen 3 3100 and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 550Ti/AMD Radeon HD 7770, while recommended specs sit at an Intel Core i5-8400/AMD Ryzen 5 2600 and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 560Ti/AMD Radeon HD 7790.

A *Deluxe Edition* of the game is also available, delivering a cool digital artbook and a great soundtrack. Available from Jan 16, 2025, on Steam.
shorturl.at/rtre7

SUPER RAPID FIRE 68K

A shmup classic gets updated

Finally this month, shoot 'em up fans can grab an updated version of classic vertical scroller *Cho Ren Sha 68K*, which has not only been updated by its original creator, Koichi Yoshida, but is also 100% playable on modern Windows systems. *Cho Ren Sha 68K*, which translates in English to *Super Rapid Fire 68K*, was originally released back in 1995 on the Sharp X68000, a now legendary Japanese-exclusive PC, and soon became known as one of the system's very best games. If you like technicolour bullet hell shmups that boast numerous power-ups and huge bosses, then *Super Rapid Fire 68K* is well worth grabbing.
shorturl.at/12R1l

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The latest instalment in the long-running 4X strategy series, *Civ VII* lets you create kingdoms and rule as many legendary leaders throughout history.

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Warhorse Studios

Henry and Hans return for more medieval adventures. A massive open world that's twice the size of the original game as well as expanded combat system are on offer.

AVOWED

RELEASE February 18, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian

The anticipated first-person fantasy RPG that is definitely not like *Skyrim*. A small delay means *Skyrim* fans can now look forward to playing it in February, 2025.

2 months

KILLING FLOOR 3

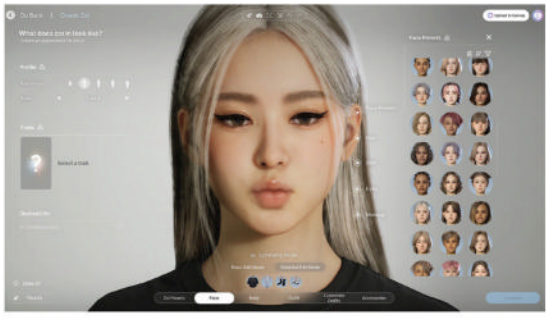
RELEASE March, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Tripwire Interactive

In the far future of 2091 join the resistance group, Nightfall, and fight hordes of bioengineered monsters called zeds that threaten to end humanity.

ATOMFALL

RELEASE March 27, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rebellion

A western version of *STALKER* that is set in the British countryside, *Atomfall* is a survival-action game set in the aftermath of the apocalypse. Cricket bats guaranteed.



INZOI

RELEASE March 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Krafton

A graphically impressive new *The Sims* rival. Create, take control of, and observe the lives of Zois, with deep new customisation and construction options on offer.

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CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Dark fantasy, turn-based RPG.

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. Heavy metal guaranteed.

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

4 months+

BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!

ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware, Inc.

The out of left field *Elden Ring* spin-off sees the action RPG transformed into a wild new co-op roguelike RPG. Expect fast runs and the series' typically epic bosses.

MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13

Uncover the origins of Italy's mafia in a gritty mob story set in the brutal underworld of 1900s Sicily. A visually rich new cinematic third-person action-adventure.

MOD

ADVENTURE FASTER

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle is a fantastic stealth-action game, but getting to the fun on PC requires sitting through a load of intro videos each time. So, why not bin them off and get to the great adventuring and puzzle-solving faster? This easy to install mod does just that: tinyurl.com/3vmsphuu

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2025 AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS FINALISTS

PCPP decides what the best gear around is.

It's that magical time of the year – judgement day! The PC PowerPlay team, together with our friends and colleagues from APC, TechRadar, PC Gamer and Tom's Guide, have brainstormed over all the products we used and reviewed through 2024, with the goal of coming up with a list of what's better than all the rest.

And that's what we're pretty thrilled to present to you today. In this issue we have all the finalists announced for the 2025 Australian PC Awards, and we'll shortly be locking ourselves away to decide what won. So stay tuned, we'll have all the winners announced in the next issue of PC PowerPlay! What fun!

MOTHERBOARDS

BEST MOTHERBOARD MAKER

- Asrock
- Asus
- Gigabyte Aorus
- MSI

BEST VALUE MOTHERBOARD

- Asrock B760I Lightning
- Asrock B760M Pro RS
- Asrock Z790 Steel Legend
- Asrock Z790I Lightning WiFi
- Asus ROG Strix X670E-I Gaming WiFi
- Gigabyte Z890 Aorus Elite WIFI 7
- MSI MAG X870 Tomahawk WiFi
- MSI Project Zero B650M
- MSI Z890 Tomahawk WIFI

BEST PREMIUM MOTHERBOARD

- Asrock X670E Taichi
- Asrock X870E Taichi
- Asus ROG Crosshair X870E Hero
- Asus ROG Maximus Z890 Hero
- Asus ROG Strix X870E-E Gaming WiFi
- Asus ROG Strix Z890-A Gaming WIFI
- Gigabyte Z890 Aorus Master
- MSI MEG Z890 Ace
- MSI X870E Carbon WIFI

GRAPHICS CARDS

BEST GRAPHICS CARD MAKER

- Asrock
- Asus
- Gigabyte Aorus
- MSI
- Sapphire
- Zotac

BEST GRAPHICS CARD

- Asus Dual GeForce RTX 4060 Ti SSD OC Edition
- Asus TUF Gaming GeForce RTX 4070 Super OC
- Intel Arc B580
- MSI RTX 4070 Ti Super Ventus 3X
- Sapphire Nitro+ RX 7900 GRE
- Sapphire Pulse Radeon RX 7600 XT

- Zotac Gaming GeForce RTX 4080 Super AMP Extreme Airo 16GB

CPU

BEST VALUE CPU

- AMD Ryzen 5 7600X3D
- AMD Ryzen 7 5700X3D
- Apple M4
- Intel Core Ultra 5 245K
- Qualcomm Snapdragon X Plus

BEST MID-RANGE CPU

- AMD Ryzen 7 9700X
- Apple M4 Pro
- Snapdragon Elite
- Best premium CPU
- AMD Ryzen 7 9800X3D
- AMD Ryzen 9 9950X
- AMD Ryzen AI 9 HX 370
- Apple M4 Max
- Intel Core Ultra 9 285K
- Intel Core Ultra 9 288V

STORAGE

BEST INTERNAL STORAGE MAKER

- Crucial
- Gigabyte
- Kingston
- Lexar
- Samsung
- Seagate
- Team Group
- WD

BEST EXTERNAL STORAGE MAKER

- Adata
- Crucial
- Kingston
- Lacie
- Samsung
- SanDisk
- Seagate
- WD

SYSTEMS

BEST VALUE OR 2-IN-1 LAPTOP

- Acer Swift Go 14
- Asus Chromebook Plus CX34
- Asus Vivobook S 15 Copilot
- Dell Precision 14-inch 3490
- HP Pavilion 16
- Lenovo IdeaPad Slim 3i
- MSI Modern 14 H

BEST PREMIUM LAPTOP

- Apple MacBook Pro M4
- Asus Zenbook S 14
- Asus ZenBook S16
- HP OmniBook Ultra Flip 14
- HP OmniBook X
- Lenovo Slim 7x
- Lenovo Yoga 7i Aura
- MacBook Air M3 13 / 15
- Microsoft Surface Laptop 15
- Microsoft Surface Pro

BEST GAMING LAPTOP

- Acer Helios Neo 18
- Acer Nitro 5
- Acer Nitro V 16
- Alienware M16 R2
- Asus ROG Zephyrus G16
- Asus TUF A14
- Gigabte Aorus 16X
- Gigabyte G6X
- Lenovo Legion 5i
- MSI Titan 18 HX

BEST DESKTOP PC MAKER / RESELLER

- AftershockPC
- Allied
- AllNeeds Computers
- ARC Computers
- BPCtech
- Centre Com
- Computer Alliance
- JW
- MSY
- Mwave
- PC Case Gear
- PLE
- Scorptec
- Umart

PERIPHERALS AND COMPONENTS

BEST MEMORY MAKER

- Adata
- Corsair
- Crucial
- G.Skill
- Kingston
- PNY
- Teamgroup

BEST COOLING PRODUCT

- Arctic Freezer 36
- Arctic Liquid Freezer 3 AIO
- Cooler Master Master Liquid 360 Atmos
- Corsair A115 Air Cooler
- Corsair iCUE Link Ecosystem
- Hyte Thicc Q60 AIO cooler
- ID-Cooling Frozn A720
- Noctua NH-D15 G2
- Noctua NH-U9S Chroma Black
- Thermalright Frozen Prism 360
- Thermalright Phantom Spirit 120 EVO
- Tryx Panorama 360 AIO

BEST MONITOR

- Acer Predator X27U
- Alienware 27 AW2725QF
- Aorus CO49DQ
- Aorus FO27Q3
- Aorus FO32U2P
- Asus ProArt Display PA278CFRV
- Asus ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM
- Asus ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDP
- Asus ROG Swift Pro PG248QP
- Benq XL2546X
- LG UltraGear 32
- MSI MPG 321URX QD-OLED
- MSI MPG 491CQPX 240Hz QD-OLED
- Samsung Odyssey G9 OLED
- Samsung ViewFinity S80UD 32

BEST KEYBOARD

- Asus ROG Azoth Extreme
- Asus ROG Falchion RX Low Profile
- Asus ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless
- Asus ROG Strix Scope II RX
- Ducky ProjectD Outlaw 65
- Ducky Zero 6108
- Logitech G Pro X 60
- Logitech G515
- Logitech G915 X Lightspeed Wireless Tactile
- Razer Blackwidow V4 75%

BEST MOUSE

- Asus ROG Keris II Ace
- Corsair M75 Wireless
- Glorious Model D2 Pro
- Logitech G309 Lightspeed
- Logitech Pro X Superlight 2 DEX
- Razer Basilisk V3 Pro 35K
- Razer Viper V3 Pro
- Turtle Beach Kone II

BEST GAMING HEADSET

- Asus ROG Delta II
- Logitech G Astro A50X Lightspeed
- Sony H9 Wireless Noise Cancelling Gaming Headset
- SteelSeries Arctis Nova Pro
- Turtle Beach Atlas Air Headset
- Turtle Beach Stealth 600 Gen 3
- Turtle Beach Stealth 700 Gen 3

BEST CASE

- Antec C8
- Antec Flux Pro
- Deepcool CH160
- Gamemax N80 BK
- HAVN HS 420
- Hyte Y40
- Lian Li Lancool 207
- Nzxt H6 Flow
- Nzxt H7 Flow
- Phanteks XT Pro
- Phanteks XT View
- Thermaltake Tower 600
- Thermaltake Tower 300

BEST ROUTER

- Asus ROG Rapture GT-BE98
- Asus ZenWiFi BT10
- D-Link Aquila Pro AI M30 AX3000 Dual-Band Wi-Fi 6
- DrayTek Vigor2927Lax-5G
- MSI Roamii WiFi 7 Mesh System
- Netgear Nighthawk Tri-Band WiFi 7
- Netgear Orbi 960 Series
- TP Link Archer BE800 Wi-Fi 7
- TP Link Wi-Fi 7 Mesh System BE85
- TP-Link Archer BE3600

EXCELLENCE AND EPIC FAIL

EXCELLENCE

For the person, product or technology that advanced the PC more than any other in 2024.

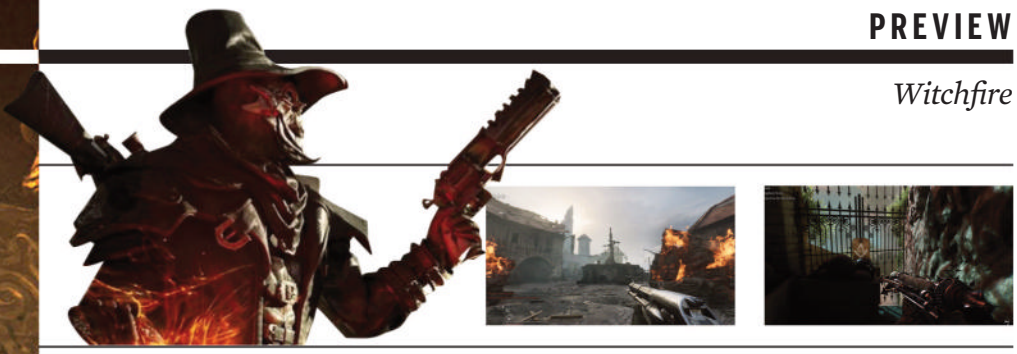
- AMD
- Apple iPhone 16
- Chat GPT
- CHIPS Act
- Visual Generative AI
- Jensen Huang (Nvidia CEO)
- Lisa Su (AMD CEO)
- Nvidia AI-driven growth
- TSMC

EPIC FAIL

- AMD Ryzen 5900 XT
- Apple Intelligence
- Crowdstrike fail
- Intel 13th/14th gen CPUs failures
- Intel's fall
- Logitech subscription mouse proposal
- Microsoft Recall
- Windows on handhelds

GOLD

The company that impressed us the most, overall, in 2024. Every finalist here is a contender for the Gold award!



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
$58.50 (Early Access)	The Astronauts	The Astronauts	theastronauts.com

WITCHFIRE

A potent cocktail of inspirations by and for Destiny sickos

W*itchfire* is one of those games that's hard to even define without context. Its store page describes it as a 'dark fantasy RPG shooter', which could describe any of a dozen FPS wizard 'em ups. So let's set the record straight, and let me explain why you shouldn't be sleeping on this deeply compelling Early Access tribute to *Destiny*'s combat sandbox.

Now, to call *Witchfire* a *Destiny* clone would also be deeply reductive. This is a rich, meaty stew of elements and ideas borrowed from other games, put together in a way that feels familiar and comforting for lifelong FPS freaks, but also distinct. There's a little bit of *Dark Souls* in there, a pinch of *Bloodborne* (especially in its grim gunslinging gothic fantasy setting), a little bit of *Slay the Spire*'s structure and even a dash of extraction shooter tension, but no one part describes the whole experience.

Speaking with Adrian Chmielarz, creative lead at The Astronauts, conveying the nature of *Witchfire* has always been a challenge. "We had this long description where we called *Witchfire* a dark fantasy first-person shooter that merges elements of roguelites, Soulslikes and extraction games into a new but cohesive experience, but this sounds weak and honestly tells you nothing, really." And he'd be right. So let's focus on the heart of this shooter: *Destiny*, Bungie's often controversial live-service shooter.

EACH RUN THROUGH A ZONE IS LOOSELY STRUCTURED LIKE A MODERN ROGUELITE

Witchfire feels like an experiment in condensing that MMO-lite monster down into a singleplayer experience, starting with its level structure.

Unlike your average singleplayer FPS, *Witchfire* is set across six explorable, non-linear zones. They're not massive, able to be traversed in just a couple of minutes, but built for replayability, and dripping with dark gothic vibes and vistas. Each map is a warren of starting and exit points, alternative routes, hidden areas and battlegrounds that can play host to an ever-shuffling assortment of procedural encounters against a roster of undead knights, musketmen, grenade-launching hulks and the occasional mossy wood-monster, channelling European folklore. All of them capable of taking big chunks out of your non-regenerating health pool.

GONE ROGUE

Each run through a zone is loosely structured like a modern roguelite; you drop in through a portal, and tackle marked Easy, Regular or Elite enemy encounters on the map in whatever order you see fit, each one rewarding you with resources and a choice of an Arcana perk that'll last until you die or return to base, building you up for a final encounter against one of the game's bosses. Whether you go the distance or tap out early is a choice, but every step, you'll be trying your luck.

PLAYED IT

And if that luck runs out, you can die and lose much of the treasure and Witchfire (the *Dark Souls*-esque hybrid experience and currency equivalent) you acquired, unless you make a run back through the map you died on to recover your goodies where they fell. While nowhere near as punishing as competitive extraction shooters, it does add a little bit of tension, and some stakes for pushing your luck. While you can never lose progress thanks to enemies regularly dropping crystallised Witchfire that sits safely in your inventory until interacted with (another smart *Dark Souls* nod), failure can slow you down, making a smooth and successful sortie a satisfying experience.

It's an unusually self-directed game, but *Witchfire* is all about letting you pick your poison. While there's some

progression objective to complete at any given point – a boss to kill, a map to unlock, or a new side area to explore – the process of preparing for that is always a little unpredictable. The perks you'll get to pick from after each encounter are random, the location of enemy spawns is procedural, and sometimes you'll just be caught off-guard even on the 20th run through a familiar map. The architecture may remain static, but the experience is not, especially once you start raising the stakes.

PRO-GNOSIS

Witchfire is now in its second year of Early Access, and first surfaced back in 2023 as an Epic Store exclusive. I'll admit to being fashionably late to this party, first playing it back in October 2024, so I asked Chmielarz what the biggest shift in the game has been since those early Epic days. I was surprised to learn that one of what I considered the most fundamental features of the game was a late addition. "The single biggest change we've done was to separate the difficulty from levelling up," he says. "Previously, when you grew in power, the witch threw more and more dangerous enemies at you. We changed it so now the difficulty is tied to your level of Gnosis, which is a separate feature, like Insight in *Bloodborne*."

The Gnosis system is how *Witchfire* handles progression between runs. Each time you complete a quest to raise your Gnosis level, the game grows more intense. New systems and upgrade options become available in your gothic monastery hideout. New enemies start turning up in old locations. New events and side-missions are added to the procedural pools. New traps and wrinkles appear, but also more opportunities to claim big rewards, as new optional paths and even side-dungeons unlock in areas you might have patrolled a dozen times.

When I first started playing *Witchfire* it wasn't until I gained my first Gnosis level that the game properly clicked. It's hard to get a feel for what it's doing mechanically until it plays its hand at that point, which takes several hours and multiple runs through the game's first area. At the moment, if *Witchfire* has one issue, it's conveying what the player should be doing, and what their motivation is. When asked about this, Chmielarz suggested that while initial guidance will improve, *Witchfire*'s opacity is still largely intentional, and perhaps not a game for those without some other shooters under their belt.

"We do not want the players to be forced to figure out the mechanics themselves and we will keep on improving that aspect of the game. However, we are pretty hard core when it comes to two other things. First, we consider *Witchfire* a gamer's game. Meaning we will not be explaining how to turn around or that you need to press Fire to fire a gun. Second, the world will be as new and cryptic to you as it is to the protagonist. In other words, there's no hint system in *Witchfire*."

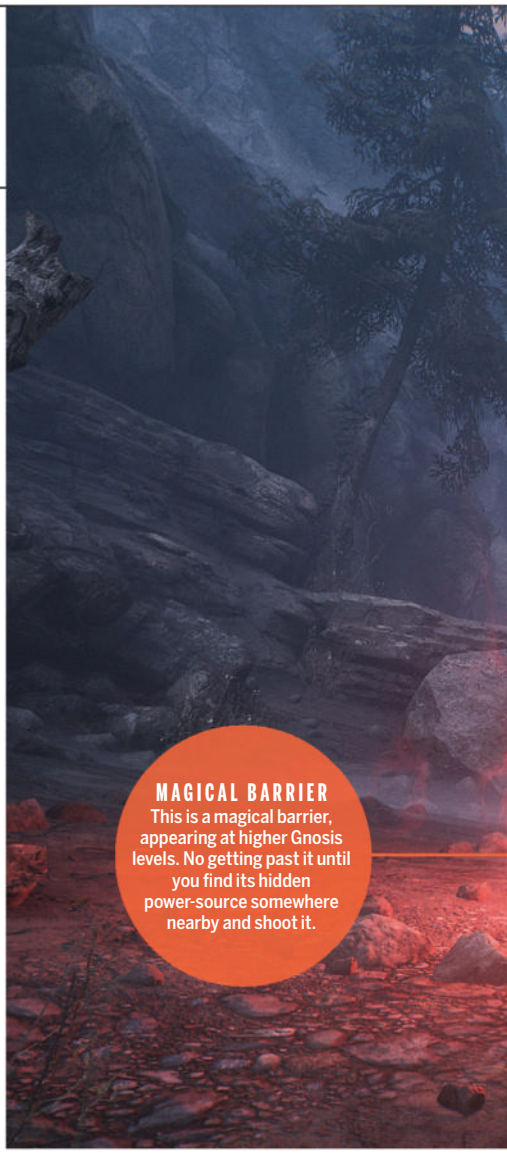
IT WASN'T UNTIL I GAINED MY FIRST GNOSIS LEVEL THAT THE GAME PROPERLY CLICKED

BLACK POWDER

Another area where the game is obviously cribbing from *Destiny* is in its weapons. Specifically, taking everything good and stripping away the MMO looter-shooter fluff. Each of *Witchfire*'s 13 primary guns feels like one of *Destiny*'s most interesting Uniques. When first acquired, they're a pretty standard assortment of pistols, rifles, shotguns and SMGs differentiated by little more than fire rate, accuracy and range, but through usage and spending resources (most commonly dropped by mini-bosses) each unlocks three traits that permanently change how they work.

My favourite pump shotgun, Echo, first gains pellets that explode shortly after impact, applying the Burn status effect. The second upgrade makes enemies fly back when killed, and the secondary explosion can now burn enemies near to the launched, soon-to-be-exploded corpse, while the third upgrade partially reloads and doubles the damage while doing a running slide. Not only do those upgrades encourage me to play like some kind of howling shotgun-toting pyromaniac, sliding into stragglers and blasting them back into swarms, but it dovetails with any Arcana perks that amplify Burn damage.

Every weapon boasts this level of technical escalation. The *Painkiller*-inspired stake gun, Striga, has its hefty wooden bolts ignite after some time in the air, turning it into a rocket launcher at range, but also a precision weapon, as headshots spread arcing lightning between nearby enemies, making it a



MAGICAL BARRIER
This is a magical barrier, appearing at higher Gnosis levels. No getting past it until you find its hidden power-source somewhere nearby and shoot it.

Take too many hits on a run and expect trouble, like so.

CALAMITY
This is a Calamity, summoned by you making mistakes or getting cursed. It's going to continually drain your Sanity until you die, or do something about it. Clock's ticking.
SNIPER RIFLE
The solution to all of these and many other problems? Believe in the power of gun. And the larger the gun the better, such as this lethal long-range weapon.

LEFT: The tanky Galley Slave is one of the game's first bosses.

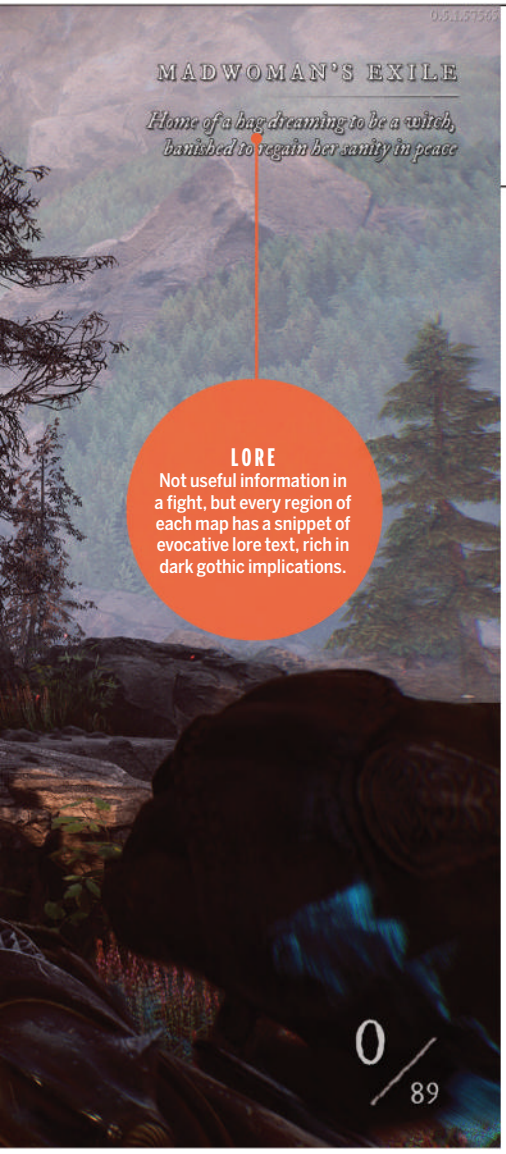
Witchfire

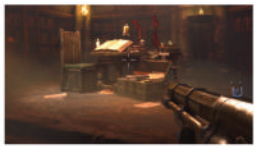
ECHOES FOR THE FLAME
Collect Echoes:
- Echoes linger in a Vault.
- Killed enemies have a small chance to drop an Echo.
WITCH AWARENESS
Take a big hit or get cursed, and the Witch becomes more aware of you. At full awareness, things get a lot more dangerous.
MAP
It's very easy to get flanked in Witchfire's open maps. You can see the Cacodemon-like monster ahead, but beware the red dots on the left.

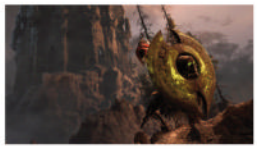
RIGHT: *Witchfire* may be grim and gothic, but it has some lovely sunsets.

FAR RIGHT: *Painkiller*'s stake gun returns, and still nails bad guys to walls.

ECHOES FOR THE FLAME
Collect Echoes:
- Irongate Castle: Cavey, Merchant's Gate
- Echoes have a medium chance to drop from Major enemies.


MADWOMAN'S EXILE
Home of a hag dreaming to be a witch, banished to regain her sanity in peace
LORE
Not useful information in a fight, but every region of each map has a snippet of evocative lore text, rich in dark gothic implications.
0/89





versatile hybrid of sniper, artillery and explosive that's also surprisingly useful up close to due to a lack of reticle bloom. It makes picking just two guns a tough decision, but I've yet to grow bored of mixing and matching my loadout.

Of course, any game riffing off *Destiny* needs to nail the rhythms and feeling of its gunplay. That sense of being a super-powered gunslinger, juggling loud, satisfying weapons and magic powers while effortlessly double-jumping around danger. A tough feat in itself, but part of the reason I keep coming back to *Witchfire* is because it nails it.

Chmielarz confirmed that, as huge fans of Bungie's shooter, capturing its gun-feel was a core design goal, though there are some areas in which the game is aiming to improve on its inspirations. "*Destiny* has, to me, the best feel of guns in any shooter... but I am not a big fan of the art direction of *Destiny 2*. I prefer *Destiny 1* more, it's grittier, less shiny, more organic. This is a reminder that art direction is more important than tech."

VIBE CHECK

More important, perhaps, but *Witchfire* is no slouch on the tech front. Despite being made by a relatively small 20-person studio, I'm confident in saying that *Witchfire* is one of the prettiest looking Unreal engine shooters around, as you can see from the screenshots surrounding my words here. And for all its looks, *Witchfire* is remarkably scalable, running at a mostly consistent 60fps on the Steam Deck.

That art direction isn't to be sniffed at either. Everything in this game is just dripping with grimdark gothic vibes, building on an interesting fantastical alt-history setting where witches and the devil are real and have humanity on the ropes. The player takes on the role of a Preyer, part of the Pope's personal special ops team of gunslinging, immortal witch-hunter generals.

It's a fun setting on paper, but without much narrative presented up front, it's more vibes than narrative, at least at the moment. Great vibes, granted, but I'm touching on the narrative so late here because at the moment it is the gunplay, the atmosphere and the unique progression mechanics that are the reasons to play *Witchfire* in Early Access. Narrative takes a distant back-seat, though that might be changing with the next planned major update, giving players the first look at Witch Mountain, the game's 'endgame' zone.

EVERYTHING IN THIS GAME IS JUST DRIPPING WITH GRIMDARK GOTHIC VIBES

PEAK GAMING

Originally envisioned as a 'boss rush' type area where the player will be fighting through powered-up versions of the previous bosses before confronting the (previously-unseen) Witch herself. Standard enough, but The Astronauts recently made the decision to rework it conceptually, and while he was unable to give me any early peeks at the next zone, Chmielarz did share some details on what's coming. "Inside the witch mountain is an ancient alien labyrinth where you and your *Witchfire* horde fight against the witch's army, affecting the world outside. This feels more like war rather than a boss fight. And yeah, it is risky as hell because everything in it is new and something we have not done before." Intriguing stuff, and while he was keen to stress that the team are still experimenting a lot with the new area's design and mechanics, it shouldn't be too far from initial release.

Not that this means *Witchfire* is anywhere near complete – this will be the first look at the final zone, but there's another two explorable regions yet to come, plus more granular Gnosis levels to ease the game's difficulty curve a little. The Astronauts aim to wrap up production within the next year, but nothing is set in stone. So the big question is whether it's worth your time and money right now, and that all hinges on what you're looking for. As a lapsed *Destiny* fan, *Witchfire* has been expertly scratching a very particular FPS itch.

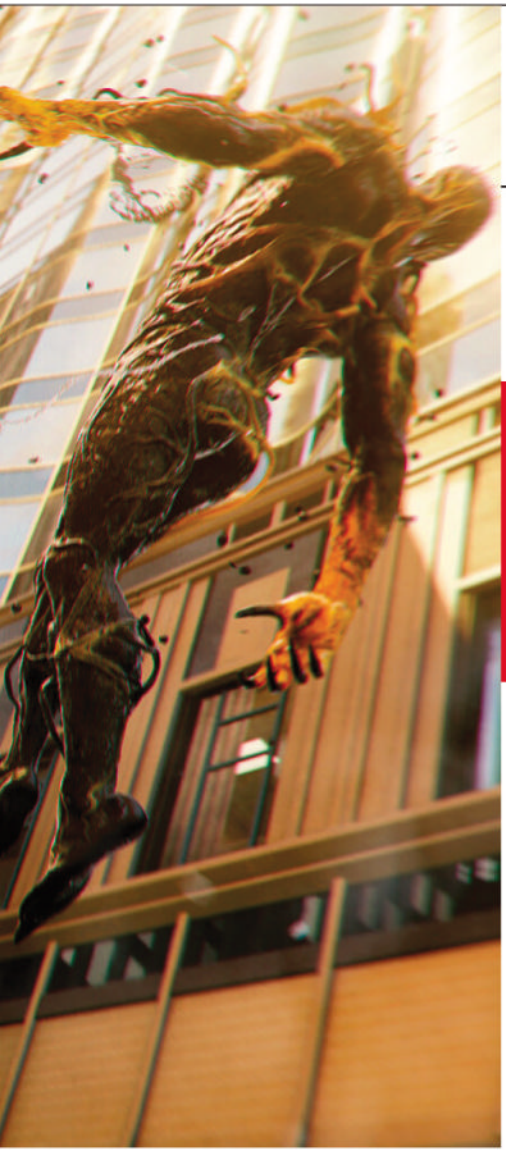
For those without that same background, *Witchfire* might not hit quite as intensely, and the game is half-finished at present, with many of its systems still in flux and nothing even resembling an ending, just a deeply compelling central action and progression loop. Still, any shooter that can replicate (and in some cases improve on) the feel of Bungie's best is worth a look at the very least. Whether that's now or once the game is closer to completion is your call to make, but in my books, this is one of the most interesting upcoming shooters of 2025.

Dominic Tarason

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

ABOVE: Ray tracing, DLSS and FSR are expected to push the game to the limit.

RIGHT: Imagine a horde mode dedicated to Spidey's rogues gallery.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 30, 2025	Insomniac, Nixxes Software	PlayStation Publishing LLC	insomniac.games

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Is there anything better than a Spidey sequel to start 2025?

Following the ports of *Marvel's Spider-Man Remastered* and *Miles Morales* back in 2022, Sony has now sped up the process of PlayStation to PC with *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*. So, what better way to kick off 2025 than swinging through the streets with the highest performance and fidelity possible?

In fact, this is now a 15-month turnaround for *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* compared to the 47 months fans had to wait for the first Spidey release on Windows, and two years for the Miles spinoff. It seems Sony is finally realising the financial benefits of bringing its biggest titles to the platform, while those on Steam and the Epic Games Store can revel in accessing one of the best games of this generation earlier than anticipated.

Even though the official specs have yet to be unveiled (as of the time of writing), there are plenty of reasons to get excited about the superhero sequel. For one, the game is being handled by Dutch developer Nixxes Software, a subsidiary of Sony that has worked on everything from *Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart* to *Ghost of Tsushima Director's Cut* to most recently, *Horizon Zero Dawn Remastered*. The studio is also set to usher *The Last of Us Part II Remastered* onto PC later this year, having cemented itself as the gold standard in the industry.

A "suite of enhanced features, including enhanced ray-tracing options, to take full advantage of a variety of setups and configurations" was confirmed by Nixxes community manager Julian Huijbregts in October 2024. Additionally, all of the previously released post-launched content such as New Game Plus, Mission Replay, increased difficulty, Photo Mode features, extra endgame challenges and all 90 suits will arrive on day one. It's the complete experience.

Sure, the lack of any story downloadable content is disappointing considering the ample opportunities to keep fans happy until the inevitable sequel – just like *The City That Never Sleeps* expansion did back in 2018. Still, the temptation to double dip and experience the game at 120fps with widescreen support, DLSS, FSR and better ray tracing can't be underestimated.

After all, this will, in theory, be the most polished version of *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*. From my initial playthrough on PS5, I did experience my fair share of clipping. Little things like models not fully generating on occasion or dialogue not lining up with characters' mouths during cutscenes. The most common was when a crime appeared on the now twice-as-large map, only to vanish as soon as I got close.

All of the post-launch PlayStation patches will launch on day one, including 90 suits.

SONY IS FINALLY REALISING THE FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF BRINGING ITS TITLES TO PC

NEW INFO

REPLAY OR SKIP?

Speaking of which, if there's no story DLC, how about expanding the numerous spawnable enemies and bases? The world that's been created by Insomniac is utterly gorgeous, however, there is a noticeable step down from the first entry in things to do. I was done and dusted with the Platinum at around 25 hours whereas the original had me thwipping past the 40-hour mark.

One of my favourite ideas the game bandies about is a Kraven-like arena where you fight all of Spider-Man's foes from all three games combined: Electro, Rhino, Scorpion, Vulture, Sandman, etc.

At the very least, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* looks to offer the best of both worlds. The agony of choosing between Fidelity or Performance mode on PS5 is, for the most part, eradicated. Being able to push the superhero blockbuster to the max with all the bells and whistles will be fantastic for those jumping in for the first time... though will that be enough to justify a second purchase for others?

Matt Poskitt

Monster Hunter Wilds

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 28, 2025	Capcom	Capcom	monsterhunter.com/wilds

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

With Wilds, Monster Hunter flaunts new storytelling chops

I've never needed much story from *Monster Hunter*. Each game's plot follows a predictable pattern: something is upsetting the ecology, and you need to battle a few dozen frenzied lizards until you and the Hunter's Guild uncover what never-before-seen creature is responsible for the turmoil.

But *Monster Hunter* never suffered for it. Its megafauna are majestic enough, its combat climactic enough, its cast of pun-slinging NPCs charming enough that even a barebones narrative could suffice. After playing through the first five hours of *Monster Hunter Wilds*, however, I'm just as excited to see more of its storytelling as I am for indulging in its latest iteration of dinosaur swordfights.

In late November, I visited Capcom's headquarters in Osaka to spend a few hours with the game and speak to its lead developers. Considering the *Wilds* open beta didn't inspire confidence in how well it'll run on PC when it launches in February, I arrived in Osaka wondering primarily about performance.

My preview session was running on a PlayStation 5, which is only so useful to compare with my experience in the Steam beta. However, while the beta's PS5 version might not have featured the origami monsters players encountered on PC, PS5 beta players reported their own framerate stumbles. Compared to those descriptions, the updated build I played in Osaka, locked in the quality-focused Resolution Mode, was smooth.

HITTING AREAS WITH SPECIAL FOCUS STRIKE ATTACKS UNLEASHES A HEAVY FINISHER

Where the open beta prescribed two prepackaged hunts with premade equipment, my Osaka demo session covered the first five hours of the finished product. From character creation through introductory quests and story-driven hunts in the game's Windward Plains and Scarlet Forest regions, I was free to hunt – with all that entails.

FANCY FOOTWORK

It didn't take long for me to start admiring the tweaks Capcom's made to the *Monster Hunter* formula. Whether battling familiar foes in the Windward Plains, like the Chatacabra and Doshaguma, or fresh opponents like the spidery Lala Barina, my hunter's ability to navigate and respond to monster attacks felt more fluid than ever.

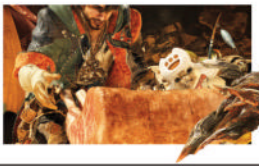
I've lately been a hammer main in *Monster Hunter*, so I'm used to a good amount of combat mobility. But in *Wilds*, even the hammer feels more nimble. Between attack animations, many weapons have gained windows where holding the analogue stick in a direction will slightly shift the hunter's footing, giving opportunities to adjust my angle of attack or scoot out of harm's way without committing to a full dodge roll and interrupting my combo.

PLAYED IT

I still had to pay attention to my positioning, but I felt more willing to seek out windows for landing heavy hammer upswings because I knew I'd be less likely to find myself whiffing the monster's jaw by just a couple of inches.

That quality combat time also meant I could get familiar with *Wilds*'s new Focus Mode, which allows manually 'aiming' attacks with the left trigger. While aiming in Focus Mode, any wounded areas on the monster are highlighted. Hitting those areas with special Focus Strike attacks unleashes a heavy finisher. In practice, opening wounds and attacking them is an express route to dealing massive damage to monsters, which is apparently the idea.

"When hunting the monsters, there are hard parts of the body that when you attack it, you bounce off. It can be hard to tell when you're fighting them which parts are really affected or not," Tokuda said. "*Monster Hunter* tends to have a longer hunting play time. We wanted to make it more efficient so that [players] could hunt efficiently in a shorter amount of time."



In terms of efficiency, Focus Mode works – almost too well. The wound-destroying Focus Strikes are satisfying, but in some of my preview session's low rank hunts I was opening and destroying monster wounds so constantly that it wasn't really worth it to use conventional attacks. That's a little concerning, but I'm not raising an alarm yet.

OUTFITTING UPDATES

Monster Hunter's armour skills are changing, too. In *Monster Hunter*, your equipment defines how you play. You don't have a skill tree or stat points to spend; you craft armour pieces that increase your attack, boost your ability to guard, or help sharpen your weapons more quickly. In *Wilds*, however, many of those offensive skills are now found on weapons instead.

The change, Tokuda said, was to let players use the new mid-hunt weapon swapping mechanic without feeling like they're restricted by their armour loadout. In *World* and *Rise*, my hammer and switch axe sets relied on different offensive skills; even if I could have swapped between the two, switching weapons would've immediately made a lot of the armour skills I had equipped irrelevant.

While I'm excited for the potential dual-weapon loadouts and the changes to combat, I'd have needed a few dozen more hours to plumb the depths of those revamped systems. Instead, what left the greatest impression during my preview session was *Monster Hunter*'s newfound focus on storytelling.

CREATING CHARACTER

As Capcom started doling out *Wilds* reveals and preview trailers, I was sceptical about the emphasis I was seeing on cutscenes and character beats. As much as I've loved the Guildmarms and Meowscular Chefs of yesteryear, *Monster Hunter* NPCs traditionally haven't enjoyed much depth. They've mostly served as manic, madcap hype men, each with their own personal brand of pun.

Playing *Wilds*, however, I was surprised to find myself in full dialogue sequences with other characters – and even more surprised to be invested in them. Unlike player characters in previous games, the player hunter in *Wilds* is a fully-voiced character with a preexisting hunter career, which my companions would reference and prompt me to explain. In turn, I could ask Alma, my handler, about her training at the Guild academy; I could ask Gemma, the expedition's blacksmith, about other hunter squads she's helped outfit.

I'm used to my fellow members of the Hunter's Guild feeling like a passive audience while my character handled all the work. In the early hours of *Wilds*, they feel like members of an actual organisation, composed of people with their own histories.

A story I'm even more interested to see play out is the Guild's delicate position in the Forbidden Lands. Shortly after arriving in the region, thought to be uninhabited for thousands of years, the Guild discovers that it's anything but. There, people have spent millennia surviving the harsh, cyclical ecology of the Forbidden Lands – and they've done it without the Hunter's Guild's combat tech.

Kaname Fujioka, executive director and art director for Monster Hunter *Wilds*, said that the development team wanted to explore what role the hunters would play in ecologies and societies they're interacting with for the first time. "We want to show what the hunters exactly are in a world like that," Fujioka said. "We feel that the story and the setting is designed to really question and make you think about, 'What is a hunter?'"

In what I played, the best lens for that question is Nata, a boy discovered by the Guild shortly after it had touched down in the Forbidden Lands. Nata's the sole survivor of a village destroyed by Arkveld, the *Wilds* mascot monster and primary subject of the Guild's investigation. By accompanying the Guild, Nata's gone from losing his home to living among people who've trained themselves to face the rampages that threaten villages like his own. From what I've seen, it's left him with a deep sense of doubt, guilt, and powerlessness.

Towards the end of my demo session, Nata joined the hunters on an excursion. In the aftermath of a battle with a new monster, as Nata struggled to keep his composure, one of the veteran hunters tried to ground him by asking him two questions, "Why does a hunter exist? To what end do we carry these weapons?" I'm looking forward to watching *Monster Hunter* find the answer.

Lincoln Carpenter

I'M EXCITED FOR THE DUAL-WEAPON LOADOUTS AND THE CHANGES TO COMBAT

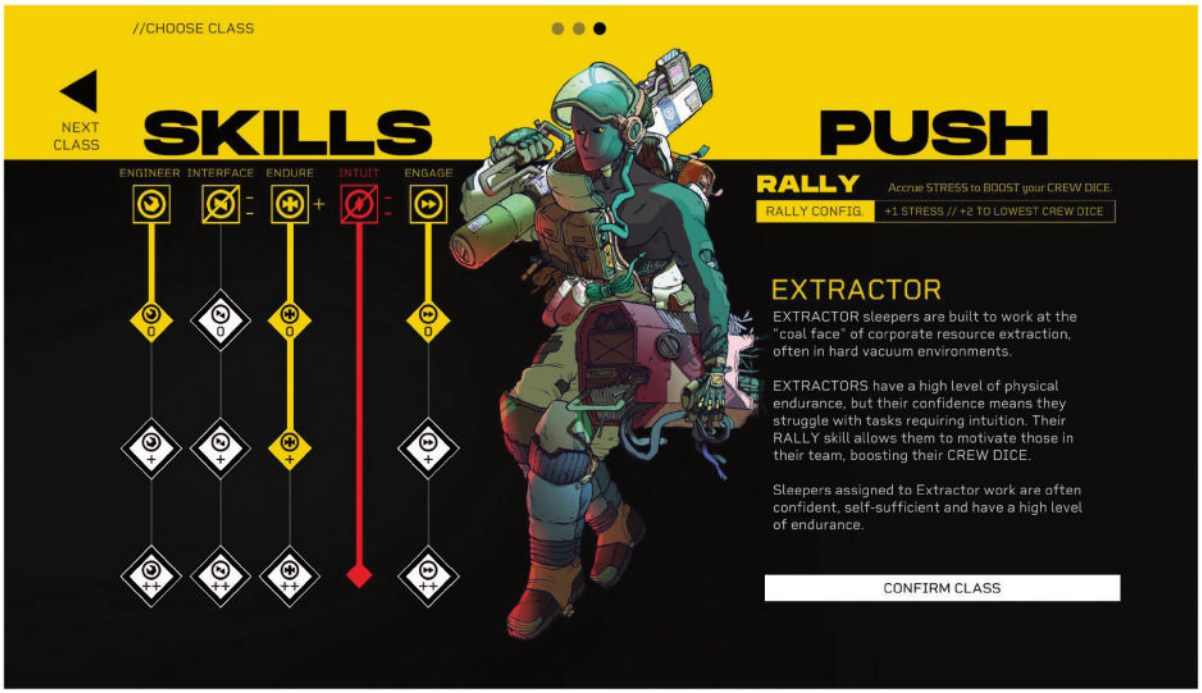
Congalala's breath weapon is bad. The other end is worse.

ABOVE: Many offensive armour skills have been moved over to weapons.

LEFT: The Lala Barina, a vampire spider made of knives...

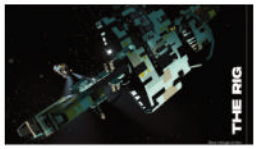
Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector

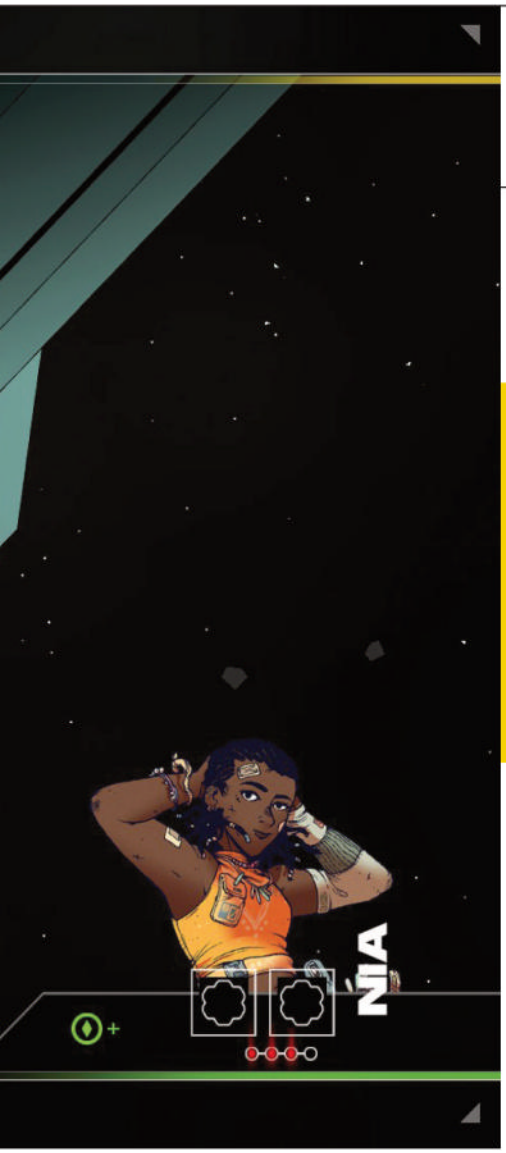
PUSH
MAP
GLITCH
RIG
SUPPLIES EMPTY
CONTINUE
COMPLETE BOARD CONTRACT
Complete Conway Signal contract
SKILL REQUIRED
DISCONNECT BACKUP
INTUIT
The interior of the drone lights up in a crimson flash...
RISKY
ACTION UNAVAILABLE
CORE DISABLED
Disabling the drone's core will stop it from ever restarting and causing Hexport or the local crews more trouble.
DRONE DEATH
Disable the core. Shut down the broadcast array. Once both are done, this Conway drone won't bother anyone any more.
CYCLE CLOCK
DRONE COUNTERMEASURE
A flashing red light signifies some change in the array. You better not wait to find out what.
SERAFIN
CARGO
16
1/5
0/5


//CHOOSE CLASS
NEXT CLASS
SKILLS
PUSH
ENGINEER
INTERFACE
ENDURE
INTUIT
ENGAGE
RALLY
Accrue STRESS to BOOST your CREW DICE.
RALLY CONFIG.
+1 STRESS // +2 TO LOWEST CREW DICE
EXTRACTOR
EXTRACTOR sleepers are built to work at the "coal face" of corporate resource extraction, often in hard vacuum environments.
EXTRACTORS have a high level of physical endurance, but their confidence means they struggle with tasks requiring intuition. Their RALLY skill allows them to motivate those in their team, boosting their CREW DICE.
Sleepers assigned to Extractor work are often confident, self-sufficient and have a high level of endurance.
CONFIRM CLASS

ABOVE: As you might've noticed by the lack of dice, here, this came down to the wire.

RIGHT: Each Sleeper body has its own Push ability to tempt you into tanking more Stress.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 31, 2025	Jump Over the Age	Fellow Traveller	fellowtraveller.games

CITIZEN SLEEPER 2: STARWARD VECTOR

'On the run' makes for bitten nails

C*itizen Sleeper* – the first game – has a very special place in my heart. Its themes mirrored the rhythm of my own life beat-for-heartbeat, as I moved out into the world for the first time: to go somewhere, alone, without any guarantee of safety or happiness, is a terror.

The first game presented a harsh, but idealistic picture of what that experience is like – yes, the forces of the world are fierce and yes, becoming safe is an uphill struggle. Community is difficult to find, and some people don't make it at all. But it is possible. What was, at first, a difficult resource management game soon became a storybook, as I discovered ways to keep my synthetic Sleeper body running. Soon enough, the place I was stranded on began to feel like home, sweet home.

Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector, from the handful of hours I've played, is a complete inversion of that comfort. This is a difficult pill to swallow for me, but not an entirely unwelcome one. The core concept is much the same – you're a Sleeper, your body is falling apart, and you need to keep pace with a set of resources to survive. But there's one key difference; you can't make a home anywhere.

While *Citizen Sleeper* offers you ending points, letting you leave the game to go and find your fortune among the stars, *Citizen Sleeper 2* hoists these ending points upon you. You are being hunted, after all, by Laine. A man who believes he owns you, body and soul. To him, your present freedom is an aberration to be corrected. All your relationships are fleeting, and you can never settle. That's a fact of life out on the starlit highway.

This is all compounded by the fact that *Citizen Sleeper 2* is far more complex than its prior entry – systems folding in on themselves to maximise your sense of resource-driven dread.

SOON ENOUGH, THE PLACE I WAS STRANDED ON BEGAN TO FEEL LIKE HOME, SWEET HOME

SPINNING PLATES

Citizen Sleeper 2 swaps out the linear bar of Condition for the triple Damoclean swords of Glitch, Stress and broken dice. Stress is built through failing checks or by using your Push ability. Glitch is induced by story events, giving you a chance to roll glitched-out dice which (with my bad luck) are basically a crapshoot. Finally, your dice can straight-up break. As you accrue Stress, each die can take points of damage when it's rolled – if all of your dice break, you gain a permanent Glitch (or just straight-up die on higher difficulties).

PLAYED IT

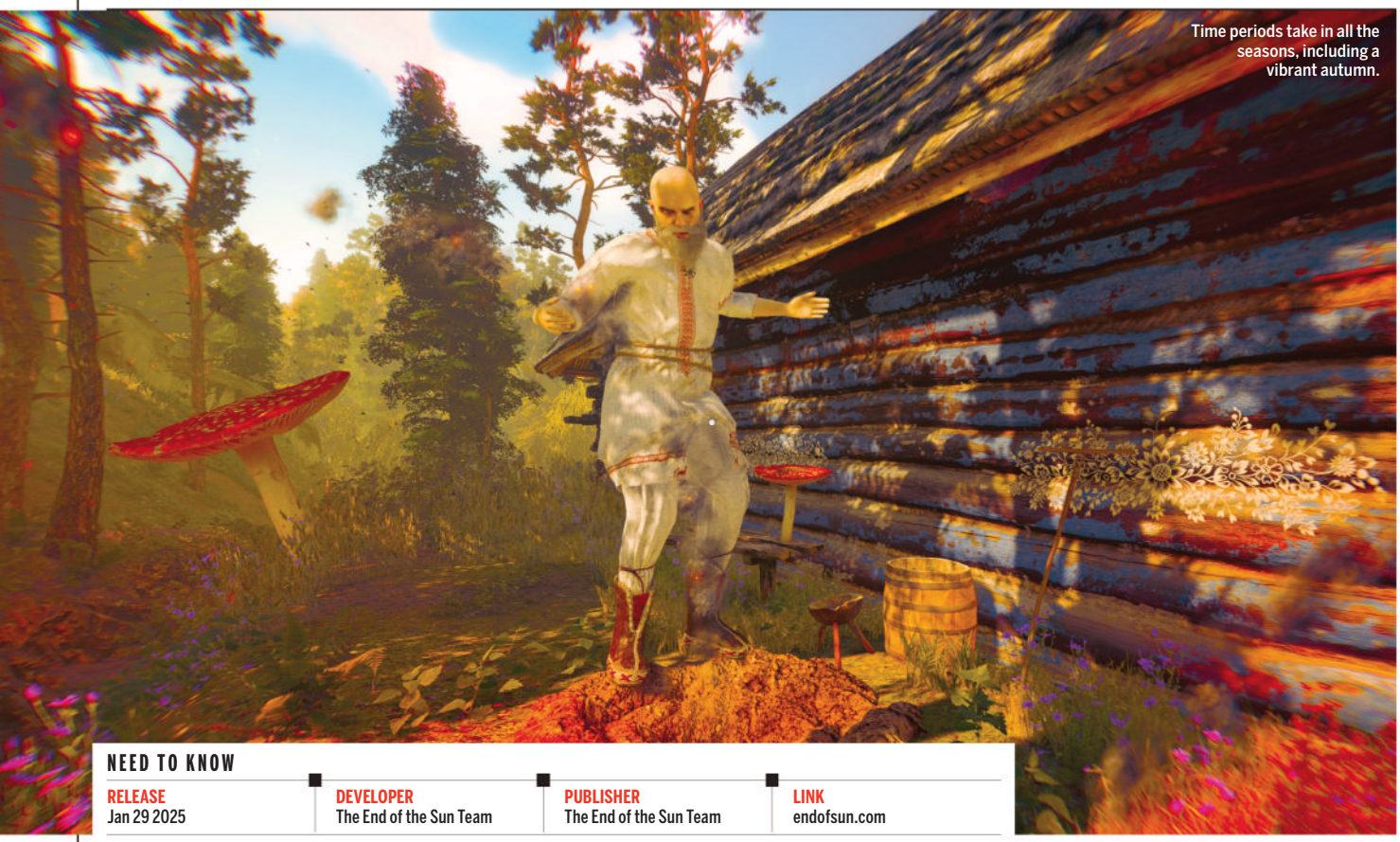
Essentially, you're kept ricocheting around a triplet of risk vs reward decisions, and the entire machine has a higher chance of collapsing the further you push. Mechanised burnout writ into digital flesh. What's more, the moment-to-moment tasks are far more fraught than they were in the first game.

Instead of dealing with a couple of doomsday clocks while building yourself a cosy nest, *Citizen Sleeper 2* wants you to go out on contracts. Isolated missions where it's just you, your crew, and a metaphorical bomb to diffuse in order to get your payday. Contracts are limited by your supplies, and if you run out, you'll start spiralling, fast.

This one-two punch makes for one nail-biter. You don't want to push your stress too far, because that'll have serious consequences later on – but you're also caged by circumstances. Do you burn the candle at both ends to get the job done, or take the hit to your wallet? It's all terribly compelling. I just wonder, at this early stage, whether I'll be able to keep up without burning out, myself.

Harvey Randall

By Ian Evenden



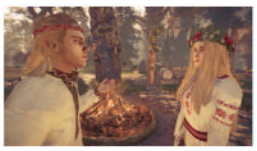
Time periods take in all the seasons, including a vibrant autumn.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Jan 29 2025	The End of the Sun Team	The End of the Sun Team	endofsun.com

THE END OF THE SUN

Magical time-travel fantasy adventures



What's that you say? A first-person exploration and adventure story-driven game, set in the Slavic fantasy world? A blurred line between myth and reality? Time travel? Yes please. Poland-developed *The End of the Sun* ticks a lot of PC gaming boxes in a post-*Witcher 4* announcement world.

PLAYED IT

And while it's easy to see the word 'Poland' and think Witcher, the series that first springs to mind when watching *The End of the Sun* is *The Elder Scrolls*, specifically *Oblivion*, with its shimmering bloom lighting, forested national park vibe, and the way the camera zooms into objects of interest. A closer comparison, looking beyond the visuals, might be The Chinese Room's excellent *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, however, with its focus on a single village filled with secrets.

The rural homestead in *The End of the Sun* isn't empty, there's just no one there. Instead of inhabitants, your character, a sorcerer known as the Ashter, discovers burned out hearths, and is led by trails of smoke and flame to points of interest. Among the Ashter's magical powers is the ability to travel through time, and this is used to visit the village for major Slavic festivals that celebrate the changing seasons. These moments are separated by years rather than months, enabling the game to bring you the stories of its characters across their lives.

POLES APART

And it's the stories that are important. There's a lot of walking simulator on show here, but it's a game about teasing out the story rather than charging about the place. To create the naturalistic look of its forests and timber buildings, the dev team visited museums and applied photogrammetry techniques, leading to a world with realistic textures and cabbages.

AMONG THE ASHTER'S POWERS IS THE ABILITY TO TRAVEL THROUGH TIME

FARMING EQUIPMENT

Upon strolling into the village, which is really little more than two buildings and some subsistence farming equipment, the first story revealed is that of Nadimir, who has woman trouble. Interact with marked points, and his ghost will appear, acting out a brief scene. Not only has he forgotten a gift for a young lady, but he's been trapped in the woodshed by a collapsing pile of logs. By picking up logs in your time, and placing them in the pile to reinforce its structural integrity, you can prevent the collapse in his. A carved figurine you find can be left on a stump so he will find it, and a missing quern stone tracked down so that he can grind flour.

The game's slow pace also seems to have been applied to its development – it's been two years since a demo version first surfaced and the game first appeared on Steam in 2018 – but a release date is finally in sight.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Kiln Studios	Kiln Studios	thisdeadwinter.com

THIS DEAD WINTER

Foxy feats in frosty forests

Having seen one game starring a fox only last month (*Spirit of the North 2*) along comes another: *This Dead Winter* features a fluffy red specimen whose home, where a few remaining animals are hidden in a deep valley, is gripped by an enduring winter and whose cub mysteriously disappears.

A third-person adventure, the fox explores the ruined landscape and learns to make use of all the switches, mechanisms and secret knowledge humans have left behind to make her way through areas that aren't as dead as you may believe.

SPIRIT IN THE SKY

There's much more than human artefacts and the mixture of high-technology and stone castle walls they've gifted to the world's new masters to interact with, however. This world is filled with spirits, from giant fish that swim through the sky to two-legged wolves that roam the forest, their heads at treetop height. Some are benevolent, and will aid our foxy protagonist in her quest, while others require more careful handling.

FIRST LOOK

The game world is semi-open, with large expanses to explore along with narrower areas that can be traversed by platforming, your fox using its agility to leap from wall to wall, dashes to break through barriers or spring between pillars, and seemingly teleport between lit beacons. One section in which the fox trots through a crepuscular forest populated by humanoid robots which come alive, a red light activating on each of their faces as power returns to dormant circuits, is as affecting as it is dramatic. Elsewhere, flags are strung between buildings, tall towers pierce the sky, and shafts of sunlight cut through the gloom of interiors.

This is an indie production from a small team in Manchester, created in the Unreal Engine by a single programmer and Kickstartered into life. The fact it looks so good, especially in motion, is testament to the talent of the people who've put years of work into the game, and any upcoming release date will be anticipated.

The world has a Morrowind vibe, with its magical fungi.

By Ian Evenden

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Jan 20, 2025 (Early Access)	Billionworlds	Daedalic Entertainment	s.team/a/1561960

YIELD! FALL OF ROME

Veni, videogame, vici

Most 4X games have you start from nothing and building an empire that reaches the stars, or at least achieves a cultural victory over your opponents, but *Yeild!* does things differently. At the beginning of the game there is a monolithic central power, and you are one of a scrappy bunch of upstarts trying to bring it down.

FIRST LOOK

Now, if you spend much time thinking about the Roman Empire, you'll know this is roughly what happened. It's 401AD, and the peninsula-dwelling pasta-lovers are in decline. The empire is struggling to govern such a vast realm, and around the edges there are opportunities for other powers to nibble chunks out of its lands.

Which of course is exactly what you do. As one of eight playable factions, such as the Huns thundering in from the east or the Caledonians fomenting rebellion in Britannia, you're scheming to defeat Rome any way you can. It's not that simple, though, as Caesar and co are a pretty entrenched presence on the map, with fortified cities, a competent army, and a navy capable of turning your ships to floating piles of broken wood, so you'll need to build up your forces before taking on the big boys. Then there are the other factions, all of whom are going to be gunning for you, trying to pull themselves up with the strap of your sandals.

ROMANES EUNT DOMUS

As a 4X, *Yield!* naturally takes place on a hex grid, and the developers at BillionWorlds have done nothing to hide this. This has resulted in a chunky look for the game, with boundaries of influence and range rendered in thick lines of your faction's colour, and your buildings roofed in the same. Catapults and other war machines look almost cute as they move across the map toward their target cities, and as the settlements burst into flames clouds of black smoke rise from their cathedrals and grain silos.

YOU'LL NEED TO BUILD UP YOUR FORCES BEFORE TAKING ON THE BIG BOYS

With games such as *Civilization* among its influences, games of *Yield!* could go on for a long time, but the devs have instead chosen to focus on tactics rather than grand strategy, with encounters moving at a fast pace rather than dragging out. The solo campaign will present a string of short-term goals with a major objective in mind that combines the results of your small victories into a giant conquest, while multiplayer comes with ranked and unranked matches, online leaderboards and a play-by-cloud game in which individual turns can take up to 24 hours to play out, allowing for a more relaxed approach akin to chess by email. The fall of the Roman Empire is almost upon us, in Early Access form at least, and this could be an interesting addition to the 4X world.

ASTROBOTANICA

More chill than an ice age

An alien biologist crashes on Earth 300,000 years ago, and instead of immediately calling in planet-wide destruction or attempting to mate with the primitive inhabitants instead sets about cultivating the soil and making potions.

What sounds like it might be a traumatic experience is rendered in a lovely, sunny graphical style and comes with a relaxed approach to survival. Your three-fingered, blue-skinned, highly educated protagonist requires carbon dioxide to breathe, and so must set up equipment to generate this from the native plant life. There are animals too, along with a newly emerging human population (who you can learn to communicate with), and some are friendlier than others. To tackle marauding creatures you can either hide and avoid them, or brew potions from plants and create clouds of sleeping gas or sticky goo to slow them down. *Astrobotanica* looks like a breezy approach to the survival game, and the idea of working with the resources of Pleistocene Earth with its pristine environment is a break from the grimy survival norm.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Space Goblin Studio	Space Goblin Studio	s.team/a/2720920

TWO POINT MUSEUM

Make an exhibition of yourself

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 4 2025	Two Point Studios	Sega	s.team/a/2185060

Following the *Hospital* and *Campus*, the *Two Point* formula now takes on history with its usual reverence and seriousness. The game switches things up from previous games with a change of focus: now, instead of caring for the patients or students, building the museum itself and making it interesting is the goal, something that looks like an improvement. Museums are cool. No really, they are.

BLOOD MAGIC

Rebel Wolves has legendary RPGs in its veins, and the studio's debut game, **THE BLOOD OF DAWNWALKER**, looks set to take the genre to new heights

By Robert Jones

The Blood of Dawnwalker

If you were to tell me that the game director of the now legendary single-player open-world dark fantasy action-RPG, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, had decided to leave CD Projekt, establish a new studio, and then create his own original single-player open-world dark fantasy action-RPG, then you'd have my attention. But if you told me he was doing that with a team of passionate, experienced, creatively free developers who, together, were building on that storied legacy by evolving the genre in some genuinely fresh, exciting ways, then you'd find me flying out to Warsaw, Poland, to speak with Konrad Tomaszkiewicz, along with other key game developers, posthaste. And what I discovered at Rebel Wolves was one the most exciting new virtual worlds in gaming.

EMERGING FROM SHADOW

Let's cut to the quick. *The Blood of Dawnwalker* is the first game in a new series (the *Dawnwalker* saga), and it is a triple-A open-world action-RPG set in medieval Europe but with a supernatural twist – you play as Coen, a half-human, half-vampire being known as the Dawnwalker. This game takes place in our world, but one where myths and legends exist despite the fact that most people don't know about them or believe in them. It is a narrative-focused dark fantasy RPG with third-person perspective camera, Unreal Engine 5 graphics engine, and a world size that is equivalent to games such as *God of War* or *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*.

Furthermore, in news that will be like a fresh, blood-filled neck to a vampire for PC gamers, *Dawnwalker* is a 100 percent single-player experience, and one that Rebel Wolves has confirmed does not feature any microtransactions, in-game events, game-as-a-service functionality or NFTs. Praise be! This is a narrative-focused action-RPG rich with cinematic storytelling. The priorities of Rebel Wolves are clear here. The studio wants to invite gamers into a dark fantasy tale that begins in the Carpathian Mountains, in one specific valley to be accurate, the Vale Sangora, where *The Blood of Dawnwalker*'s main character, Coen, lives and, after becoming involved in the game's dramatic opening events, gets turned into the being known as the Dawnwalker, a half-human, half-vampire being with unique powers. In the day, Coen is a human, with all the traditional mortal weaknesses that entails, hence the need for a good sword or two. However, at night Coen transforms into a vampire, and gains access to powerful supernatural abilities, and it is by navigating this duality that *Dawnwalker*'s story progresses. As we will see later, though, how this game's narrative plays out, and the consequences it will have on Coen and the Vale Sangora, are completely in the player's hands, with the game boasting two uniquely fresh RPG gameplay mechanics, a 'narrative sandbox' and a quest-determined 'time as a resource' day and night cycle. Before we dig into these mechanics, though, with key insight from game director, Konrad, as well as *Dawnwalker*'s creative director Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz and design director, Daniel Sadowski (both also veterans from CD Projekt's *Witcher* games), let's take a trip into *Dawnwalker*'s lore-rich world.

THE VALE SANGORA

Coen lives with his family in the valley of Vale Sangora, which is a rural mountainous area within the Carpathians during medieval times. The story of *The Blood of Dawnwalker* begins, though, with the Vale Sangora being taken over by a group of powerful vampires, who via their acts both turn Coen into the titular Dawnwalker, as well as kidnap his family. So begins Coen's journey to save his loved ones in this remote valley that, thanks to the vampire antagonists destroying the few bridges and passes leading into and out of it, is now cut off from the rest of the medieval world.

The capital city of Vale Sangora is Svartrau, which is nearly one thousand years old at the commencement of the game, a destination which has been designed by Rebel Wolves as a melting pot of various Eastern European cultures including Romanian, Hungarian. Polish, Czech and Slovakian, among others. The Vale Sangora has always been a remote part of Eastern Europe but now it is cut off and forgotten. It wasn't always, though, and thanks to »

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DAWNWALKER IS A NARRATIVE-FOCUSED ACTION-RPG WITH CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

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1 The capital city of Vale Sangora is Svartrau, which is nearly 1,000 years old at the commencement of the game's story.

2 Beneath the rural dystopian landscape lies remnants of the Vale Sangora's mysterious ancient past.

3 The cathedral in Svartrau, which remains partially under construction following the vampire invasion.

4 A unique design element to *Dawnwalker*'s vampires is that, as they age, their razor sharp teeth get progressively longer.

RELIGION
Christianity once thrived in Vale Sangora but, under vampire rule, a new religion based on dark blood offerings has been created, with all humans forced to attend these sacrificial blood masses.

"BOTH ACTION AND INACTION IN DAWNWALKER HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES"

it being rich in natural resources, and especially precious metals like silver, in more remote centuries before the vampire invasion it was prosperous, with its silver mines in particular being notable. Recently, though, thanks to the decline of its mining industry, as well as a devastating plague and the barbarous rule of the valley's last human leader, Skender Vragosti, unrest and famine has become widespread in the land.

Enter the *The Blood of Dawnwalker*'s antagonist vampire clique, led by master vampire Brencis, who take over the disordered Vale Sangora by force, before then establishing themselves as the new lords of the valley as well as its religion, with its inhabitants forced to attend church each week to pay a sacrificial blood tax to remain living and, so the vampires say, under their protection. It is against this backdrop, as well as the largely hidden ancient history of the Vale Sangora that is typified by intriguing ruins and buried subterranean complexes, that Coen's story takes place. A narrative that Rebel Wolves wants the gamer to have freedom and agency in via the narrative sandbox approach.

NARRATIVE SANDBOX

"So narrative sandbox refers to the way we craft our content," notes Mateusz when I ask him about it. "It's how we allow you, the player, to interact with it. So the core of it is

CULTURE
Vale Sangora's culture is an amalgam of Eastern European influences, with its customs, architecture, garments, weapons and industries stemming from the region's medieval history.
LOCATION
Vale Sangora is a remote valley deep within the Carpathian Mountains. Sweeping vistas merge with dense forests, ancient ruins, rustic dwellings, and various wild and domestic animals.

maximising players' agency and freedom of choice, while, at the same time delivering the high-quality narratives that we are known for crafting in the past.

"*Dawnwalker* is not going to be a game where it's a pure sandbox, where you're just focusing on the gameplay. We do want you to experience these moments with the world of the characters, and the emotions that these situations can evoke, and so on, and so forth. But, at the same time you are looking for ways of maximising freedom as you do." Daniel then adds: "In our game, we want the world to be dynamic. We don't want it to be static, like waiting for the player all the time. So both action and inaction in *Dawnwalker* have serious consequences, and that's also how we structured the quests, so that it can all be showcased while you play the game." Mateusz, expanding on Rebel Wolves' approach here, adds that, "Narrative sandbox informs not only the main quest – it also informs all the other types of content that we have. We are trying to make tie-ins from these. You know, you might encounter seemingly inconsequential, smaller activities of the world, but we are trying to make them tie into this main narrative. It kind of feels like a synergetic approach where all this content helps each another to be this cohesive whole. It's not like there is the main story, and there are just

sidequests that are unrelated to it. All of it kind of overlaps a little bit, if that makes sense." Finally, Daniel concludes that, with the narrative sandbox approach to storytelling and player agency, Rebel Wolves is "trying our best to balance everything out, and there is a lot of cool content that you can interact with. We are trying to tie-in all of that content so that things affect each other in cool ways, and give you a lot of freedom as to what to do next. Sometimes it feels like playing a paper RPG where you can really just go into the world, and pick your adventures. That's sort of what we are aiming for here with the narrative sandbox as well".

SUN AND MOON

This approach to player agency and freedom has another dimension under Rebel Wolves, too, as not only are all of its quests and player decisions connected in some way or other, but they're bonded with the game's day and night cycle, with each quest progressing the game's clock to some degree. Time is a resource for Coen to use, and with just 30 days to save his family, each decision the player makes, be that during the day as human Coen, or at night as vampire Coen, is going to have an impact on that. To be clear, when Coen is simply exploring Vale Sangora time will not progress, but as Coen completes any quest, no matter how big or small, time will pass.

I ask Konrad for an explanation of Rebel Wolves' thinking behind this conjoining of narrative sandbox with a quest-tied time-as-resource gameplay mechanic. "[Along with] the narrative sandbox, I think, this is the most important thing for me," he explains, "because, when you put it together, it makes something really unique – this feeling of urgency in the games can be upgraded.

"For example, when you're playing *The Witcher 3*, and you know that Ciri needs help, but you decide to go play Gwent – it's something which, you know... you feel that it's a game, and it's a really good game. But it's a game. And maybe if you had some resource, and you know that maybe if you don't go, something would happen – then your thinking about this game would be different, and maybe the immersion would be better, and maybe your emotions would be different."

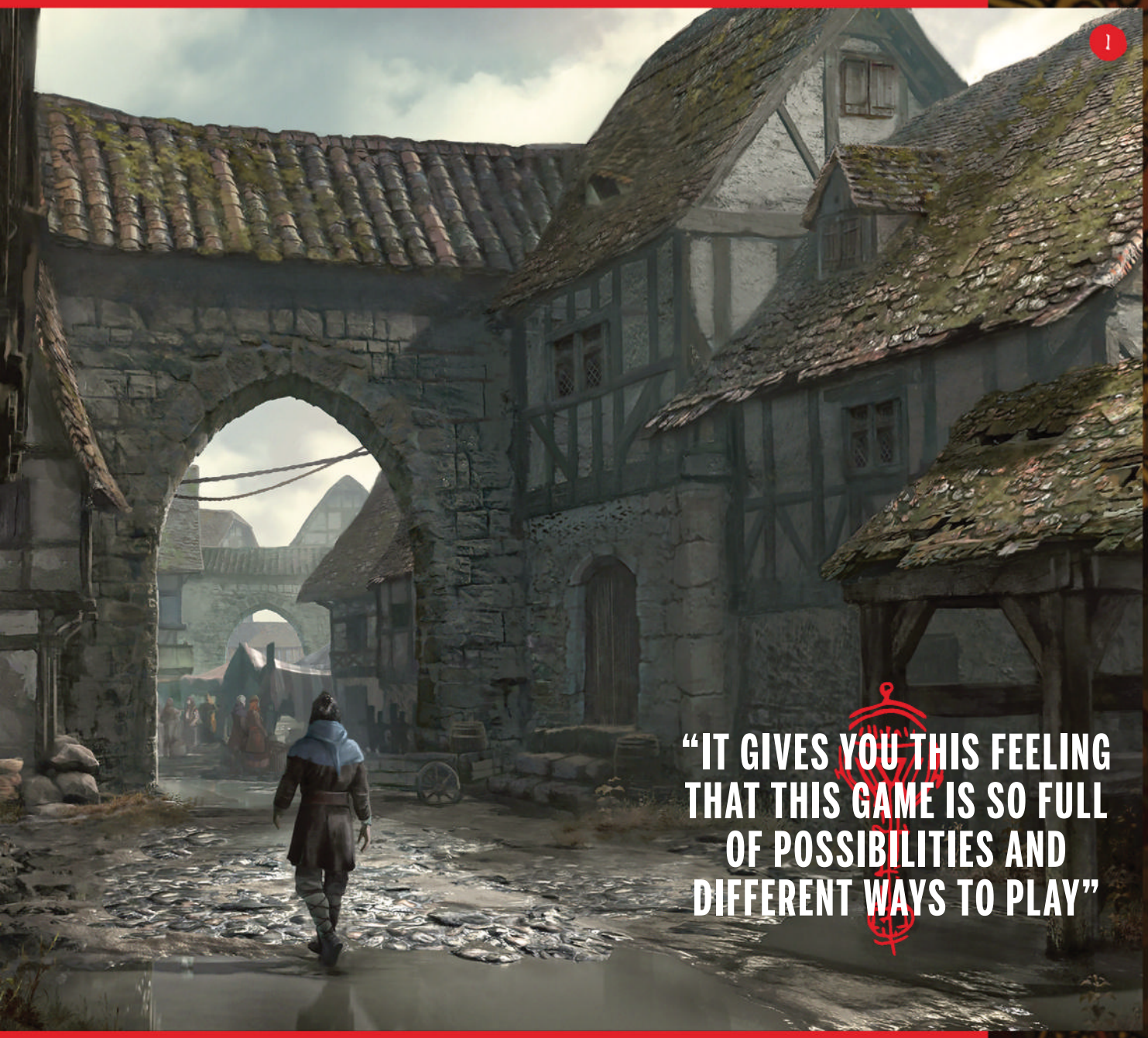
Daniel, as design director, adds that "the time system is a core element of our narrative sandbox. It moves only when you do the content, because we do not want the time system to be there to rush the player or to stress them out. We want the time system to be part of the narrative experience, and part of the whole 'both action and inaction have consequences' [approach].

"It will work in interesting ways. It will definitely force you to make choices at some points, like what to do, and what to ignore, because you will also have to choose which content you want to do, and which content you want to ignore, in order to maximise your chances of defeating the main enemy. But you will be able to choose between different ways to approach the problem, and that all ties into the narrative sandbox again."

It sounds potentially incredible, an interlocking system of content and decisions that is based on a time-limited day and night cycle, with each choice affecting other aspects of the game world in reactive, immersive ways. It reminds me of the deep levels of reactivity shown off in Larian Studios' masterpiece, *Baldur's Gate III*, but with an added time-as-a-resource mechanic thrown on top, where you can only complete a certain number of quests in a specific time period. But, while it sounds potentially remarkable, it also sounds like an incredible challenge to balance for the player. I ask Mateusz, the creative director, about how he and the team are approaching that.

"It's something that we are still working on, and we'll be doing a ton of playtesting, I'm sure, and modifying as we go," he says. "Because it's not a finished game, it's difficult to answer it fully. We have a lot of QA, and we can track how they usually play the game. But of course they're a bit biased because they play the game continuously. So at some point you do playtesting with people who don't know the game that well, and you do a lot of telemetry. You check which paths did they take most often? There is a certain amount of average data you can get [and] in most cases, it is pretty accurate.

"For example, looking back at *The Witcher 3*, we had this situation in Velen where when you're starting the game we noticed that most people



"IT GIVES YOU THIS FEELING THAT THIS GAME IS SO FULL OF POSSIBILITIES AND DIFFERENT WAYS TO PLAY"

1 Time is a resource in *Dawnwalker*, with each quest completed progressing the in-game clock.

2 However, while simply exploring the game's virtual world, time does not pass. Time anxiety is not a thing here.

3 During the day Coen, the game's protagonist, is human. But at night he is a vampire, with supernatural abilities.

4 The rustic interior of a bedroom from a dwelling in Vale Sangora. Most inhabitants of the valley are now poor.

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"I SET UP REBEL WOLVES BECAUSE I FELT THAT I WANTED TO MAKE SOMETHING UNIQUE WITH MY FRIENDS"

1 The partially ruined interior of a library, showing off Eastern European elements and the game's grimdark vibe.

2 Concept art for one of the antagonist vampires who have taken over the Vale Sangora. Note the long teeth.

3 Humans attending a blood mass. The ruling vampires act as the Vale Sangora's new deities, and demand blood tribute.

4 Despite the dire state of the valley's human population, Vale Sangora remains a naturally beautiful location.

2

take a very specific path. We felt like, 'OK, this is the first hour of experience. Let's move some things around, so that these first few hours will be even better'. We made sure you get all the cool stuff from the start. So this is how you usually do it. You gather data. You track it. You modify content based on it. You won't be able to cover every possible permutation. But I think it's also the beauty of it, because it creates these cool user experiences that we did not predict, actually. I think this is what is great about it, because this is what creates these conversations between people. It also gives you this feeling that this game is so full of possibilities and different ways to play it. So it also boosts replayability."

Daniel then adds, "We really want every player to have a different experience – a unique experience – with the game and with the story. That's why we were crafting all this content to fill the whole game's world with many interesting quests, and many interesting side stories to discover, and many secrets to uncover as well. I personally think that it's going to be really fun to see what will be the content that a very small percentage of players will uncover. What combination of choices will lead to this very unique outcome that only a couple of players will see? I love reading about that stuff, personally, from other games, so I think it's going to be really fun to see in our game as well."

LEADER OF THE PACK

So why Rebel Wolves, and why *Dawnwalker*? After learning that Konrad's favourite games include *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Ultima VII*, I get a candid response from Rebel Wolves' founder.

"I set up Rebel Wolves because I felt that I wanted to make something that is unique with my friends," says Tomaszkiewicz. "Of course, we have a huge love of RPG games, and what has been done before in the past. I feel that those things, those rules of RPG games, can be expanded and evolved. We had crazy ideas. We knew that, you know, if we wanted to make them, we needed to open our own studio, because it would be hard to convince any big company – you know, with non-IP – to change, and do something new, and do something crazy. Actually, it's risky, because we're doing some solutions which are new. And the second thing is that we will have a studio where we work with the people, and among them, not like at the bigger studios where it's harder. I felt that a smaller team is capable of doing more, because the communication inside the team, and it's easier to speak about the vision. It's easier to feel the creative fire, and to do something special."

But what about Rebel Wolves' debut intellectual property, which the team hopes will become a multi-game *Dawnwalker* saga?

"I felt that I wanted to do a game which would not be a game about, like, a normal, let's say superhero, which we know from Marvel movies and so on and so on. It's hard to do those stories because you are [just] stronger and stronger and stronger. I searched for an idea for the hero, which would be near the ground – or grounded – and needed to solve things in a different way. But, also, I wanted to give some kind of superhero to the players. That's why I designed a protagonist who, in the day, is a human, with all the weaknesses of a human being. [However], at night, you are a vampire, which is stronger and faster, and you have better abilities and supernatural skills. It's somehow interesting, this duality of the hero, which we know from Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, for example. It's something in pop culture that is well-known and wasn't yet explored in games. It gives you a different layer to those non-realities, and I think it would be quite interesting because nobody yet has done that. And we will see how people will like it."

And, from what I've seen so far, I've got more than sneaking suspicion that gamers, and specifically PC gamers who have a ravenous desire for mature, freedom-filled and thought-provoking gaming experiences, are going to more than just like *The Blood of Dawnwalker*. For me, right now this looks like a engrossingly dark and complex action RPG that is not just building on all-time greats of the genre like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, but is actively looking to bring something new to the table. And, honestly, after meeting the Rebel Wolves themselves and hearing about their inspirations, passions and collective vision for this exciting new action-RPG, I feel this new studio is going to deliver something truly special. ■

SNUG LIFE

Cosy games have escaped the farm to become a huge-selling genre of their own

By Ian Evenden

The phenomenon of cosy gaming really took off during 2020-22, but the idea of following daily routines, making connections with nature and in-game characters, or games that offer their players lower amounts of stress than *Elden Ring*, has been around for a lot longer.

You could go back to 1996, which was a pretty good year all round, but specifically saw the launch of *Harvest Moon* on the SNES. Known as *Farm Story* in Japan, and now the first game in a series called *Story of Seasons*, this series of farming life-sims has expanded beyond Nintendo's consoles to PlayStations, Xboxes and PCs. In the *Seasons* games, you restore an old farm, grow crops, tend livestock, meet townsfolk and maybe even marry.

And if you've played a certain 2016 life-sim, that will all sound very familiar. *Stardew Valley* is a sensation, a game still getting updates and selling new copies – it was up to 41 million in sales by the end of 2024, 26m of them on PC, which means it beats *Diablo III* and *The Witcher 3* – nine years after launch, and which has seen a revival in games with similar mechanics. While creator Eric Barone has never made a secret of the games that inspired Pelican Town, his game's influence on those that came after can't be denied.

THERE IS A LOT MORE TO COSY GAMING THAN FARMING SIMS

There is a lot more to cosy gaming than farming sims that allow you to date NPC villagers. And as a subgenre – the boundaries between games are as grey and porous as to barely exist at all – it's gloriously broad. More of a vibe than a set of guidelines, all it takes for a game to be cosy is whether you can imagine yourself playing it by a fire on a winter's day, or if it makes you feel like you are, even in the midst of summer.

STRESS RELIEVER

Many cosy games offer gameplay without stress, but that doesn't mean there's no challenge or even no combat, though it is often optional. *Stardew Valley* and other life sims operate within a strict time limit for each day – get caught out of bed at 2am and you'll pass out with a bill for medical expenses – and their worlds change with the seasons, but puzzle games without timers pushing you towards failure can be cosy too, especially if their art leans into it.

"The concept really lent itself to making a sort of gentle puzzle game," says Lukas Steinman, one half of *A Little to the Left* developer Max Inferno. "As we've gotten a bit older here, we've had a lot less time to sit down in game and we've often found ourselves gravitating towards gentler experiences. Games that are very permissive in

TOP: *A Short Hike* from Adamgryu gives you an island to explore filled with childhood friends.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Animal Crossing*'s *New Horizons* instalment released for Switch in 2020, just in time for the pandemic lockdown months.

ABOVE: *Stardew Valley* was many PC gamers' gateway into the world of cosy games, and remains a classic.

their progression, and that have a lot of surprises around each corner. Kind of a strong 'I want to see what comes next' kind of mentality."

For Steinman, timing was also essential in choosing to make a cosy game, "It also came about at the start of the pandemic. So the game itself kind of touches lightly on some of the anxieties that we were feeling at the time. And so making kind of a gentler game just was really kind of therapeutic for us as well."

Steinman's partner in art Annie Macmillan gives some insight into the process behind creating the game. "We were prompted by a game jam theme, and that's sort of how the seed of the game originated," she says. "But we made decisions throughout the process to make it easier for the player, less frustrating, trying to ease tension points wherever we could. And I think that you don't need something that's frustrating for it to be fun or interesting. I think that quiet and contemplative can draw you in, and be a really nice place to linger."

A Little to the Left contains a feature that elevates it in the echelons of cosiness – the ability to just quit a puzzle and move onto the next one, 'Let it Be' in the game's parlance. It's significant because it removes a common frustration from playing, the feeling of being blocked, of not being able to progress, because you haven't made the particular mental leap required of you. Players of graphic adventures will be familiar with the feeling, the solution often being to use every inventory item on every interactive surface to see what it does and stumble onto the solution. Ron Gilbert, in *Monkey Island 2*, created a puzzle using US-centric wordplay that has wrenched many players into spasms of annoyance, and where a 'Let it Be' button would have saved much hair from being torn out. Even the choice of language, recalling the Beatles and with a pleasingly gentle-sounding cadence, offers a message: there's no shame in moving on, don't stress.

"Let it be came from a memorial I went to," says Macmillan. "A friend of mine passed, and one thing that she'd

ANATOMY OF A COSY GAME

Essential ingredients

TIMETABLE
A regular heartbeat to the game, like getting to bed or a shop opening, gives it a comforting rhythm.

GROWING
Plant seeds, raise animals, watch them grow over time and harvest their products, then craft from them.

GATHERING
Explore the world, see what's laying around. Take it home. Don't worry about stealing, more will spawn tomorrow.

COMBAT
Optional, but this videogame staple has a place in cosy games. Can speed up gathering, or just make you feel good.

FRIENDSHIP
Give NPCs gifts, and watch the number of hearts go up. Friends will give you extra dialogue, options, and even marry you.

FRIENDS
With their large heads and anime eyes, the coffee-seekers who frequent the Critter Café are just begging to be spoken to and befriended. Maybe you can take things further.
CRITTERS
It wouldn't be a Critter Café without critters, and the *Pokémon*-alikes that exist in this world don't disappoint. Unlike in *PalWorld*, they don't come with guns.

» said on her deathbed was, 'Let what is be.' I wasn't there, but that was what was passed along during her memorial, that she had said that. I thought that was really beautiful, and I was just reflecting on this game that we were making. I just kept worrying it was really uptight and, like, didactic, like we were telling [you] that there's one way to do things. And that was really stressing me out. I love the idea that there's multiple ways to be, multiple perspectives, and that's a beautiful thing about the world. There's more than one way to approach something and see things. It just is more fun, and I always thought it was funny that you could skip the whole game if you want."

THEME PARK

The idea that games can be made out of ideas you find beautiful, rather than ones that are exciting, or that you think will sell well, is an important thread within cosy games. Another common theme is building and creation, whether that's a farm, a series of friendships and deeper relationships, or a business. Running a shop or restaurant in a cosy game isn't the same as it is in *Overcooked* or *Tapper*, which use time pressure and the threat of angry customers to stress the player and try to force errors, but a more relaxing experience. See the cat café players can operate in animal-riding RPG *Calico*, which shrinks the player character down to the same size as the ingredients they're using while putting together a recipe, turning the simple act of making a cake into a platform game. Or *Good Pizza, Great Pizza*, which has you upgrade your shop decorations, cooking equipment and toppings as you take on five rival chefs to see who can make the best pepperoni-topped Italian treat.

Critter Café, which appears to have been made in a deliberate attempt to make lovers of cosy games explode into a cloud of sparkly kittens thanks to an overdose of cuteness, combines these ideas. In it,

COSINESS INTENSIFIES

Games to watch in 2025

TINY BOOKSHOP

A management game that taps into the dream we've all had of packing it all in and opening a bookshop by the sea.

OUT AND ABOUT

A foraging adventure that incorporates cosy game staples such as cooking, crafting, and harmony with nature.

KITORI ACADEMY

Wizard's apprentice life-sim with a school timetable to provide that all-important cosy game structure. Also talking frogs.

HAUNTED CHOCOLATIER

Little is known, except it looks a lot like *Stardew Valley* in style and will be very cosy.

VIBES
Just look at this place. The Critter Café has a retro style, is filled with customers who have fashionable haircuts, and is full of cakes. What's not to like?

ABOVE: *Unpacking* from Witch Beam marries a block-fitting puzzle with a cosy lack of stress and a sense of nostalgia.

you both collect creatures and serve food, decorating your café and accommodating customers' needs in order to gain experience and level up. Serving food requires a minigame, which are all fairly forgiving and will give you XP even if you don't get them quite right, so it takes away the stress of failure. There's even latte art.

Creator Eleanor Gregory was a big fan of *Animal Crossing* before she became a game dev, starting work at England's Sumo Newcastle at the beginning of 2020 – a perfect piece of timing for anyone attempting to correlate the rise of cosy gaming with the pandemic. *Critter Café* came out of a game jam in 2022, and Gregory tells us a bit about how it was made.

"I ended up pitching and making a small prototype for *Critter Café* and that was the idea that got a lot of love and support from the studio and the people judging the game jam," she says. "It became a full project towards the end of that year. And over the time of its development, I've been both a gameplay programmer – doing some of the code for it – and also having a hand in promoting the game and working with a lot of the design at the beginning, fleshing out my original small thing into a full-scale project. I'm a big fan of wholesome games in general, so I kind of just started from something kind of self indulgent to be honest. I went with a wholesome setting that I thought would make a good game, and also would personally love to spend time with. I love fantasy animals, and I also have a lot of good memories of good times at animal cafés. As the [cosy] genre kind of developed over the last couple of years, there's a whole lot of exciting vibrant settings to explore."

TURNING THE SIMPLE ACT OF MAKING A CAKE INTO A PLATFORM GAME

STYLE IT OUT

For Gregory, the cosy games genre benefits from containing a wide range of styles, as long as they have one thing in common, "I think it's a genre that does kind of have quite a broad definition to it," she says. "I describe mine as low-stakes escapism, but I'm sure there are some games out there that don't look as cute and cuddly that you could also say are low-stakes escapism. It probably varies a little person to person within that genre, like, I know some people find it very relaxing playing the factory games where you set up insane production lines, that kind of thing."

The original *Harvest Moon* seems to have been a team effort, with two directors, a producer, artist and composer on board at developer Amccus, and *Disney Dreamlight Valley*, which combines cosy game systems with familiar characters, came out of bustling Gameloft Montreal, but there's a distinct tendency for cosy games to be indie productions, created by small teams or even individuals. It's unlikely that a lack of stress in the game is mirrored by a lack of stress in development, but the lack of corporate interference, and the purity of vision that comes from a singular driving force, may have something to do with creating the cosy vibe.

Certainly, this newcomer on the established genre scene is here to stay, and might even lead to the classification of new types of game by the way they make you feel rather than what happens or how you play them. *Assassin's Creed* as a travel experience – something possible in its Discovery Tour mode – or an isometric fantasy farming simulator in which you grow the herbs needed by elves to make magic potions.

Whatever the future holds, PC gaming is broad enough to take all types (as a look at the 'all upcoming games' page of Steam will tell you) and the regular injections of gentleness and smiles, stress relief and companionship, that cosy games bring lead to broader audiences and closer connections between game and player, and those can only be good for gaming in general.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

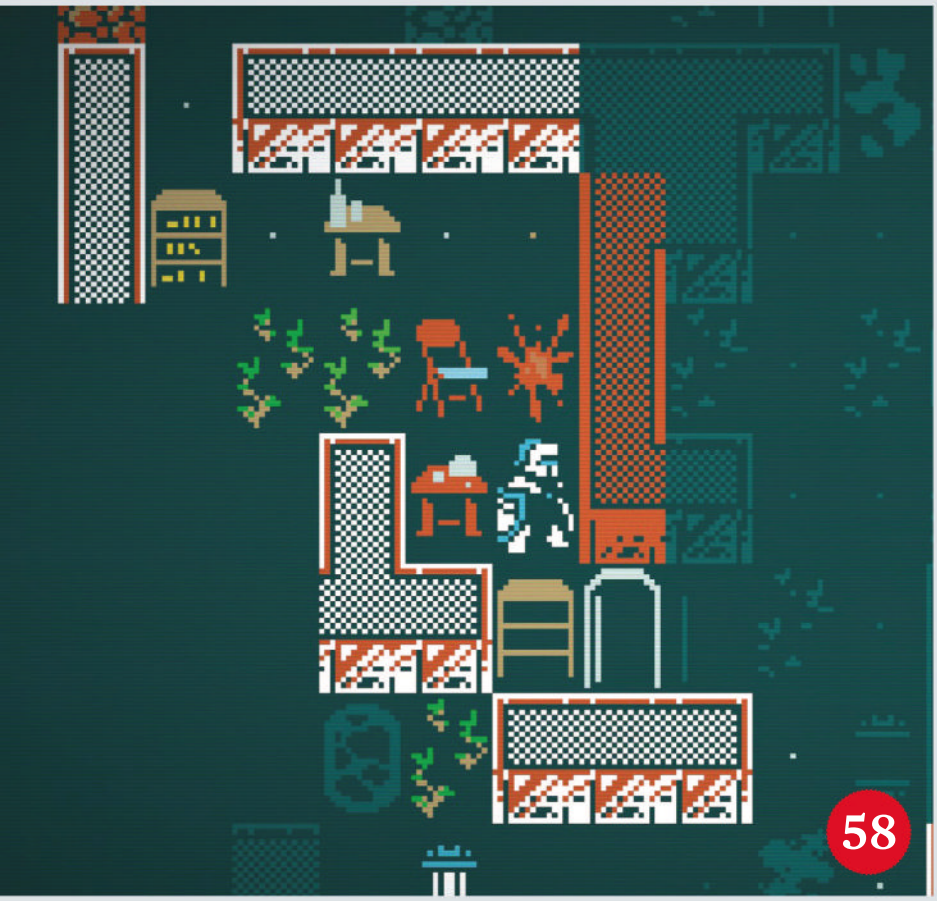
PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

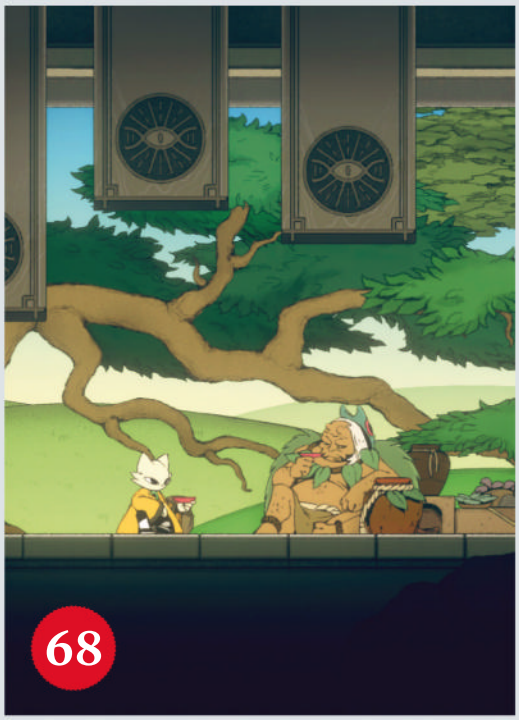
The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Make-up time

PC PowerPlay has the very best editorial team in gaming journalism, with many of the very finest industry writers on our staff. However, despite this, there have simply been so many top games released on PC over the last year that we've not managed to cover all of them at launch. If anything, this shows the PC gaming industry's remarkable ability to keep on producing fantastic new experiences even when, at the big-business end at least, many studios are being shuttered.

As such, while we've got some notable new games reviewed this issue, we've also got a selection of older games that, due to their quality, we felt we needed to go back and do make-up reviews for. These are games worthy of our attention too, as their high scores this issue prove. Enjoy!





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FREE GAMES

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This month's tormented reviewers...

JON BOLDING
Specialist in
Whimsical distractions
Currently playing
Caves of Qud
This month
Fought horrors from the darkest corners of the cosmos. We call them console gamers.

ELIE GOULD
Specialist in
Wearing spandex
Currently playing
Marvel Rivals
This month
Decided to go to Edna Mode for a new superhero costume. There were... no capes!

JOSH WOLLENS
Specialist in
Rob Zombie's beard
Currently playing
Hall of Torment
This month
Torched his many enemies with a giant flamethrower. Oh, and in *Halls of Torment* he...

TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Comeuppance
Currently playing
Mouthwashing
This month
Ran around PCPP Towers brushing people's teeth. We've told him about that.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Elementary deductions
Currently playing
Sherlock Holmes
This month
Worked out that, yes, console gamers are in fact 67% less attractive than PC gamers. Fact.

CHEW THIS

CAVES OF QUD is an epic science-fantasy RPG

By Jonathan Bolding

Across the great salt desert there is a jungled plateau encircled by mountains and speckled with the ruins of an advanced, ancient civilisation. At its centre lies the Spindle, a towering cable that stretches into and through the heavens. This is where your stranger arrives, the protagonist in an epic science-fantasy RPG full of engrossing stories and elegantly designed, deep world simulation. It's the best one I've ever played.

Caves of Qud is a traditional roguelike RPG in form, a top-down, turn-based game that relies on text and simple-yet-evocative graphics to convey its world. It doesn't stick hard and fast to permanent death, though, instead letting you choose whether you want save points and even tweak how much fighting you'll have to do. Nor does *Qud* stick hard and fast to the traditional roguelike rules of having an opaque, frustrating user interface and arcane, entirely keyboard-driven control scheme – it even plays very well on a mobile PC like the Steam Deck.

You make your character from a variety of archetypes that describe teched-up normal humans or the far more numerous mutant inhabitants of Qud. You then build in a relatively freeform way, choosing new skills, upgrading your abilities and gathering equipment for a dizzying array of possibilities. From there you set off across Qud from your starting village in true RPG sandbox fashion, choosing to follow or not follow the many quests and whimsical distractions you may come across. A lot of that will involve carefully delving into the ruins of the ancient civilisation of the Eaters of Earth, fighting the creatures you find there, and pilfering their treasures.

A seasoned player can burn through the main story in 15 hours

Each playthrough has the same world map but randomises nearly every local area according to a complex system of generated histories chronicling the sultans who ruled Qud in ages past. What they did then influences what you find now, where you go and what you can expect to find there – and it integrates that generated history into the main story quest's fixed objectives in clever ways that you might otherwise think had the hand of a designer behind them. Though it may take you a hundred hours to really get to grips with and master *Qud*, a seasoned player can burn through the main story in 15 hours.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sprawling science-fantasy RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
$39.99

DEVELOPER
Freehold Games

PUBLISHER
Kitfox Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cavesofqud.com

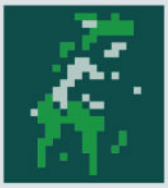
LAYER QAKE

The big-idea, high-weirdness science-fantasy world of Qud's far future is of an old genre (think Dune) with its own tropes, such as influence from ancient cultures and mythology, but one that's so underutilised in videogames that the setting comes off as refreshing. The spires of humanity's ruined past sit below and on top of Qud, forming a layer cake of dungeons filled with objects from a civilisation so outrageously advanced that they invented teleportation and mined the neutron-degenerate matter at the heart of dead stars. The Eaters' civilisation was once so advanced that its fall was just as spectacular as its rise, leaving Qud a vast ruin cut off from the universe and scoured by terrible plagues – fresh water is so precious, for example, that a dram of the fluid is the only true currency on Qud.

Pure-blooded 'normal' people have become one of many different successor species, and ancient genetic engineering combined with reality-altering phenomena have unleashed a tidal wave of strange creatures onto this world – the many talking plants, for example, barely register as exciting compared to a Twinning Lamprey, which exists in a strange quantum state where it will die only when both its bodies are killed simultaneously. Qud is a world where you start off fighting Hyena-people in a swamp with a bronze dagger and end it clad in zetachrome armour made of forgotten matter from the start of the universe, fighting mecha and cosmic terrors while wielding an eigenrifle that fires a subatomic

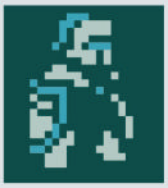
QUICK PICKS

Some examples of Qud player-characters



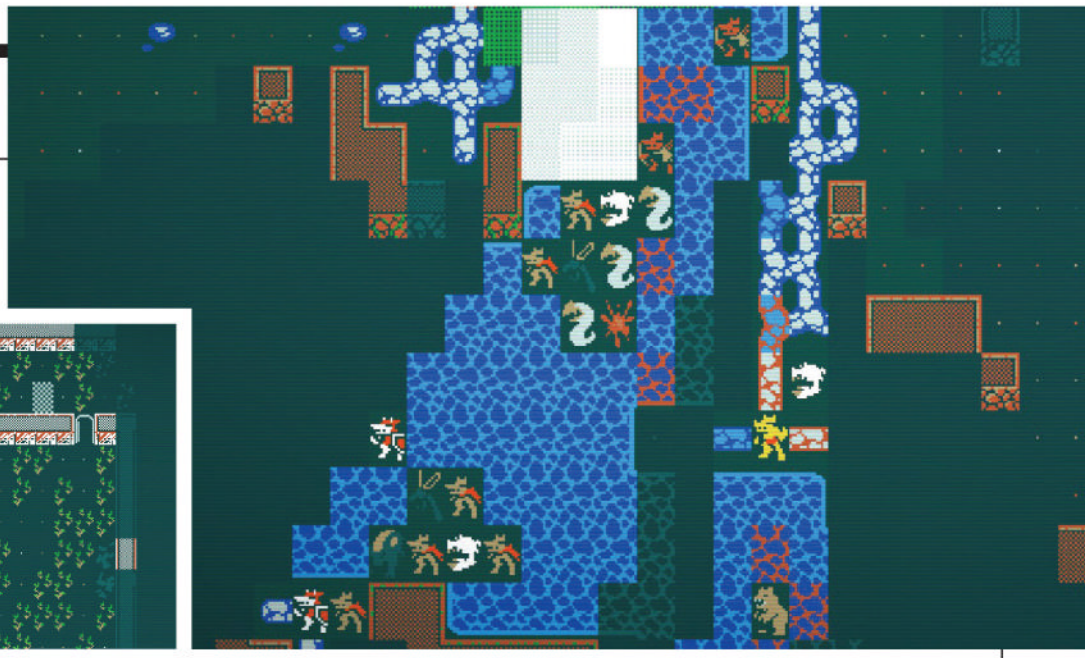
MARSH TAUR
The marsh taur uses a freezing ray to keep enemies in place. Downside: you do need two pairs of boots. Boo.

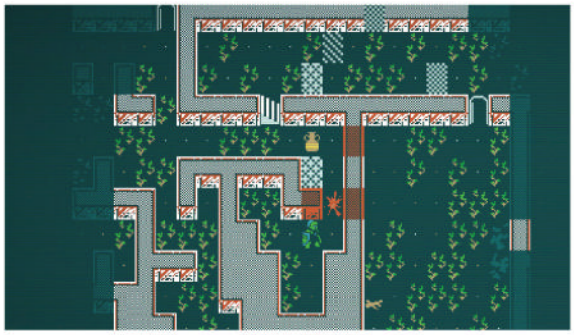
BZZZT
A bug with the power to generate their own electricity and an affinity for tech. Downside: honestly kind of gross.

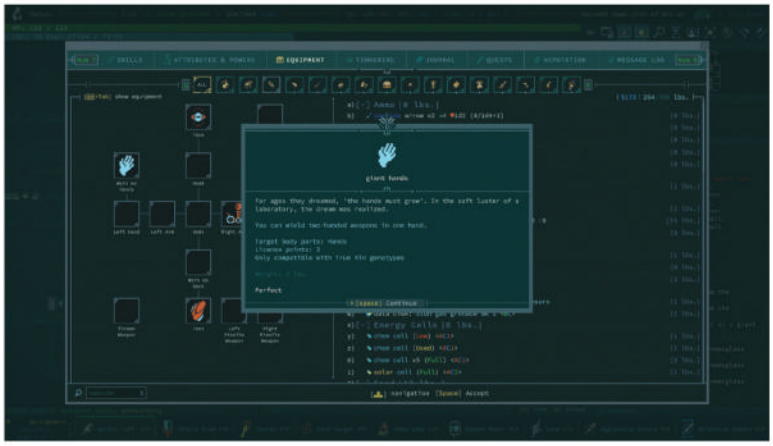


PRAETORIAN PRIME
A true-human guardian from an icy arcology. Always on watch thanks to built-in night vision.

FIRST GARDENER
From the jungles comes a master of stalking the underbrush for tasty treats – makes use of the buffs you get.



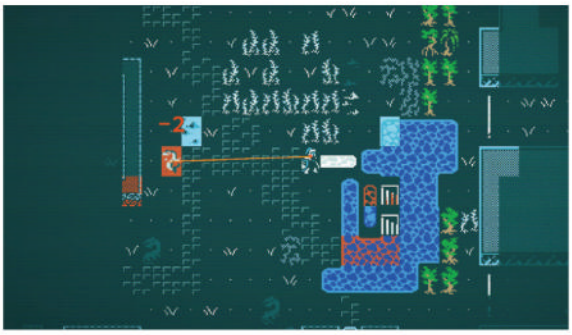




ABOVE: A thermal grenade in a river makes an impromptu mist screen.

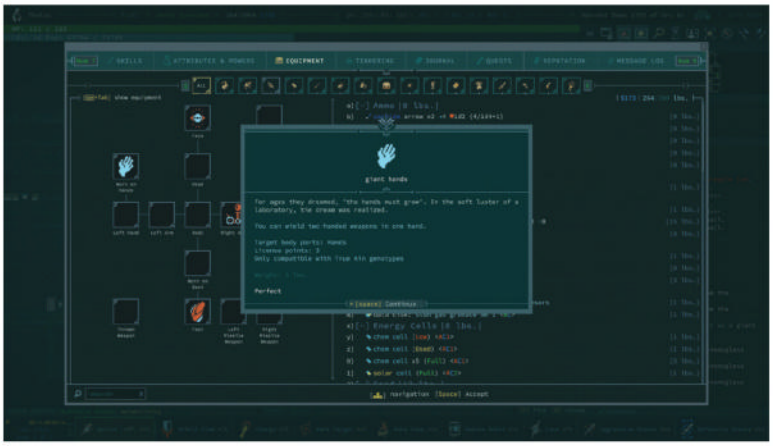
BELOW: Statues of ancient sultans give valuable historical clues.

T:26° Sated Quenched 399/405# 372$ QN: 100 MS: 115 AV: 9 DV: 7 MA: 6 Hindsun 26th of Nivvun Ut liminal floor, Dulil, Cookholme, 4 strata deep
/ 192
Exp: 191443 / 207460
liminal floor, Dulil, Cookholme, 4 strata deep
Nearby objects
rubble
Message log
southwest in your waterskins and canteen.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You take the compass bracelet from the chest to the east.
:: You disassemble the sleep gas grenade mk I. You receive tinkering bits <AB>.
:: You disassemble the fractured microchip. You receive tinkering bits <D>.
:: You pass by a door.
:: The way is blocked by some rock salt.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
:: There doesn't seem to be anywhere else to explore.
:: You pass by a frowning moon mask, a steel war hammer, and a human corpse.
:: You pass by a feathered chain mail, a blood-stained steel dagger, a blood-stained human corpse, and a puddle of bloody salt.
:: You pass by a human corpse.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a set of stairs down.
:: You pass by a door.
:: The way is blocked by some rock salt.
:: You pass by a blood-stained human corpse.
:: You pass by a human corpse, some leather armor, a two-handed steel war hammer, a human corpse, and a human corpse x2.
:: You pass by an ape fur hat, a sturdy carbide long sword, and a human corpse.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
CTS: springing, inspired, defensive stance
[F] fire [R] reload
Sprint off <1> Shield Slam <2> Charge <3> Mark Target <4> Activate Stopsvalinn <5> Aggressive Stance <6> Lase <7> Defensive Stance <8> Rebuke Robot <9>



ABOVE: Sometimes a crit makes blood go... everywhere: wall, table, chair.

RIGHT: Occasionally you just have to break out the freeze ray for fast enemies.



Tholos
T:26°
Hungry Quenched
337/405# 367$
QN: 100
MS: 115
AV: 9
DV: 7
MA: 6
Hindsun 11th of Nivvun Ut
Look | ESC | (F1) unlock | space interact | W walk
Kyakukya
Nearby objects
Yurl
Message log
:: You pass by a swarmshade tree.
:: You pass by a swarmshade tree.
:: You pass by a swarmshade tree.
:: You pass by a dogthorn tree.
:: You pass by a ziv bough.
:: You pass by a dogthorn tree.
:: You pass by a woven basket.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You spot a dromad caravan.
:: You note the location of a dromad ca
the Locations > Merchants section of yo
journal.
:: You pass by a low mensa.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by some sandstone.
:: You pass by some sandstone.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
:: Godmode now True
:: Godmode now False
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a door.
:: Mayor Nuntu takes the empty injector
:: Mayor Nuntu takes the copper nugget
:: Mayor Nuntu takes the rough agate ge
:: You take the advertisement for the d
of Ishrokas, legendary ichor merchant.
:: You take Corpus Choliys.
:: Trade complete!
:: You pass by a door.
:: You pass by a swarmshade tree.
:: The way is blocked by a wooden fence
:: You pass by a sign.
Yurl
Yes, the Consortium of Phyta. We're a merchant fellowship of trees, vines, shrubs, weeds, flowers, herbs, cacti, algae -- most sorts of plants, really.
I can't say I trust any of them, but there is no doubting their usefulness. My shelves are full and the gossip flows.
> [1] What about fungi?
[2] You're a member of the Consortium of Phyta, right? What do you know about the Earl of Omonporch?
[3] What are you? What's your story?
[4] Live and drink. [End]
[L] Look
[Tab] Trade
[Esc] Cancel
ACTIVE EFFECTS: inspired, defensive stance, springing
[F] fire [R] reload
ABILITIES
page 1 of 3
Sprint off <1>
Shield Slam <2>
Charge <3>
Mark Target <4>
Activate Stopsvalinn <5>
Aggressive Stance <6>
Lase <7>
Defensive Stance <8>

particle beam capable of piercing every single thing on the screen.

The main quest takes you on a journey well-suited to pit stops, dotted with odd characters such as a deaf-mute albino bear-porcupine gunsmith and a very rude talking fungus you have to bring with you by letting it grow on your skin. It also stays varied: you'll delve ancient ruins for lost technology, yes, but also manage diplomacy among factions, make friends, solve riddles, and unpick that generated history. All of this is written in a prose so flowery and rich that it passes beyond purple and arrives in the same place as something like Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

The world and writing and story are so appealing in part because *Qud* draws from a diverse set of sources that aren't just other videogames and obvious, obligate nerd pop-culture stuff. Its cultural borders extend well outside the limits of so many games. It's rare we get the pleasure of playing a videogame influenced by Dune or The Book of the New Sun or Gamma World that also freely quotes Lord Byron and AE Housman.

GET WEIRD

Your character's traits and background will be just as rich as the world's. You might play a True Kin, one of the last unmutated remnants of old humanity close enough to their biology and genome that the Eaters' technology, robots, cybernetic implants and miracle medicines still recognise and work for you, enhancing yourself with cyberware like extra-large hands and firearm hardpoints to wield four two-handed chainguns at once. You might instead be a mutant with a beak, wings, night vision and talons whose mutations grow in power until they can sunder steel. Your mutant might have psychic powers like cryokinesis and telepathy and disintegration. You might even play as a purely physical chimera that grows 12 arms.

It's not just variety that makes *Qud* so much fun, it's the depth of simulation in the world you explore. Aside from your health value or the rare damage calculation that can go to the hundreds, you rarely have to deal with numbers larger than 30 when considering statistics and attributes. But *Qud*'s world is powered by a physics simulation that lets you drill through walls with a jackhammer or melt rock into lava or spread clouds of corrosive gas that shift in the wind. The characters you meet all have a faction and a base attitude and an allegiance to it that plays out in hilarious ways: you might be beloved by apes, causing the shaggy white monsters that roam the canyons to leap to your defence, or hated by insects, causing typically chill giant dragonflies to come after you with a vengeance. Manipulating other factions' attitudes toward you is key to enjoying *Qud*, causing you to form alliances with groups like the machine-worshipping Mechanimists or become self-appointed protector of the villagers of a randomly generated town.

When you see a biblically accurate angel you should just run away

STAY WEIRD

Random generation can of course make or break a game like *Qud*. Sometimes it's against you in the most hilarious ways, sometimes it's just frustrating as you plumb some deep stratum praying that the next chest has some upgrade – please, any upgrade – for your gun or armour. Sometimes it's for you as it spits out a unique relic that feels purpose-made to fit just the character you wanted to play – as a sword-wielding knight I once found a shield that could reflect enemy lasers back at them.

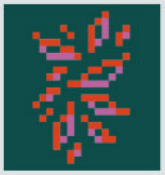
Your tolerance for unpleasant, run-ending (or save-reloading) surprises has to be pretty high as you first discover things like which robot is armed with missile rack, how to kill a Twinning Lamprey, and how when you see a biblically accurate angel you should just run away. You can contract infections or lose a limb, but to enjoy yourself those must be interesting problems to solve or situations to exploit, part of your overall story rather than frustrations. The fun to find in *Qud* is about learning – reading the flavour text for hints, figuring out which randomly-generated named creature to befriend, and carrying a variety of tools for different situations. Always have an EMP grenade on hand, for example, to deal with wayward robots. You have to be willing to try and fail and to learn when it's better to run away, consolidate your gains, and try again tomorrow. Every challenge in *Qud* was not hand-made to be beaten. Quite the opposite, in fact.

That is no surprise to fans of the traditional roguelike's deep details and convoluted systems and surprising random events. For others it will be unpleasant at first. *Caves of Qud* has what is likely the best, most modern interface and controls in a game of its kind, but the experience is still at times frustrating as you try to unravel just what happened in the last combat round that caused you to die. For some who have not played games like this before, simply the act of learning to control and manoeuvre your character will be frustrating. Despite this I cannot recommend *Caves of Qud* enough for its innovations in mechanics and storytelling, however anachronistic it may look. Besides, on top of it all? You can easily mod this game. ■

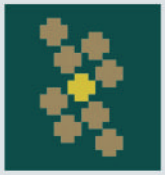
HILARIOUS STUFF TO TRY

Qud gets real funny, real fast sometimes

SPRAY-A-BRAIN
An item to turn an inanimate object into a new friend. Tables, doors, you name it.

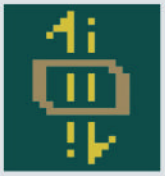


MUMBLE MOUTH
A fungal infection that whispers secrets of the universe to you. Definitely worth it.

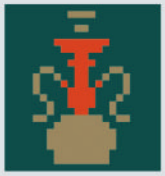


PSYCHIC GLIMMER
Sufficiently powerful psychics attract extradimensional assassins. Uh-oh.

EVIL TWIN
You can kill the evil twin, cut off its face, and wear that on your own face for a bonus. Yes!



PHASE OUT
Move your matter to the next dimension over. Be sure not to come back inside a solid object.



HOOKAH
You can smoke mint waterpipe with a camel-man like it's the 1990s all over again. Dude!

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Caves of Qud is a genre-defining achievement in play, story and roleplaying freedom. Sweet!

94

GOLDEN BALLS

Pachinko deckbuilder **BALLIONAIRE** has a joyous spring in its step

By Abbie Stone

In 2007, a game called *Peggle* was released. In 2008, the world suffered a global economic crisis. To this day I refuse to believe these two facts were unrelated. *Peggle* was as all-consumingly moreish as it was simple – it was essentially just a pachinko machine, where you fired a ball into a screen full of 'pegs'. The only agency you had was the direction you fired the ball in. After that, all you could do is sit back and watch, making it almost entirely luck-based.

Once you finally accepted that, the spell would hopefully break, and you could finally uninstall the bloody thing. But now developer newobject has come up with *Ballionaire*, a twist on pachinko that adds roguelike deckbuilding elements. Essentially *Peggle* has gone to college, smartened up and gotten itself a master's degree in compelling strategy gameplay. Oh no. Oh God no.

Peggle has gone to college, smartened up and gotten itself a degree

The goal is to make enough money to pay a tribute that has to be cleared every seven balls. The starter tribute is $500, which is worrying, because the board is initially a complete tightwad. Hitting these pegs pays out a pathetic one dollar apiece, the kind of financial reward that would embarrass even a games journalist. Luckily, after every ball you get a choice of three obstacles (also, a little confusingly, called balls) that you can add to the table. A trampoline will pay out $200 if you hit it, and bounce the ball upwards. A smiling tree will also pay out $200, but only if you hit it from the bottom up. Ah, but as an apology for that irritating caveat, the tree also gains a small multiplier bonus after every single ball played, meaning it can become a substantial payout in the late game.

TRAMPOLINE BALL

Oooh, hang on! If I place the trampoline ball under the tree, I'm far more likely to get that lovely multiplier money. And naturally this kind of synchronicity is what you're aiming for with every ball you place on the table. Some balls are 'droppers' which means they'll drop another ball when you hit them. These pair well with 'holders' that will hold onto any balls that hit them and give some lovely bonus in return. Crucially, some balls automatically activate at the start of each go, like a fantastic butterfly ball that flies up the screen.

RANDOMNESS

The trick here is to put together a Heath Robinson machine so sophisticated that any randomness doesn't stand a chance. There's a Piggy Bonk ball that pays out $800 for every coin ball it's holding, and I've become obsessed with moulding my entire strategy around stuffing coin balls into it, regardless of what tools the game is offering me. Idiocy? Well, yes, but the runs where my beloved pig stratagem has worked have given me gloriously satisfying payouts.

Balls are divided into subcategories, such as Agers, Movers, etc. I had fun slowly working out what all these different terms meant. And that's good news because the game did a pretty lousy job of explaining them. There's a Ballipedia tucked away in the pause screen that gives you details on every ball, but often only gives you half the information you want. "Adjacent triggers to this ball have a +0.1 multi for each coin ball held." OK, cool, and a 'trigger' is...?

FIVE DIFFICULTIES

There are five difficulties, with the highest forcing you to place horrible annoyances on your lovely table. One has to be hit 500 times before the end of the game, or you lose. I love these bastards. Worrying about them while also still trying to hit those required tributes is a great, tricky balancing act.

I just wish it went further. After you've cleared the five difficulties, that's your lot, and it feels like the game could easily keep escalating – look at all the horrible debuffs on offer in the create your own table mode! The lack of an endless mode is disappointing too – it'd be a perfect addition.

But maybe it's greedy to complain about longevity when I got 20 fun hours out of *Ballionaire*. It's a marvellous start to a year that follows the launch of the almighty *Balatro*, and with a few updates this could easily become my new podcast game of choice. For now, it's the elevator pitch of a *Peggle* deckbuilder, ball-illiantly executed. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A pachinko machine you can actually manipulate into a strategic little roguelike

EXPECT TO PAY
$12.34

DEVELOPER
newobject

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics

MULTIPLAYER
Well, you can share your tables with other players. Does this count?

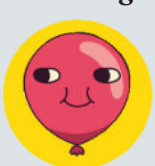
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2667120/Ballionaire

NEW BALLS PLEASE

Common drops that are well worth taking

BUMPER
Bounces the ball across the screen. Make sure you place something good in its path.

CATERPILLAR
Transforms into a brilliant butterfly ball, but only if you DON'T hit it for five rounds...

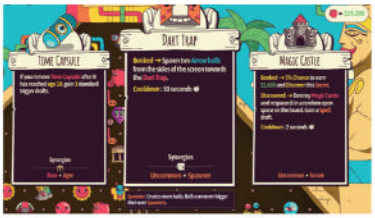


BALLOON
Sends a balloon ball floating UP the screen. Suck it, physics! Yeah loser, suck it.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Ballionaire from newobject is a pachinko-roguelike that properly rewards strategic play. Terrific fun indeed.

80



ABOVE: Trust me when I say the Deathwheel stage has been named with no hyperbole whatsoever.

FAR LEFT: The pinball table, with its finite-use flippers, is the best of the bunch.

BELOW: The opening pyramid table has the same point of entry for the ball every time. Other tables aren't as predictable.

MINTY FRESH

MOUTHWASHING is my new feel-bad favourite horror game

By Ted Litchfield

I played *Mouthwashing* entirely in one sitting and had to lie down for a while afterward to recover. I felt vile, unsettled at what I'd seen over the previous three hours. *Mouthwashing* is about as classic a walking simulator as you can get mechanically, and while its stabs at more intensive gameplay fall a little flat for me, its narrative, vision, and atmosphere make it one of this winter's standouts, a people's champion of indie horror for very good reason.

The game begins with you playing as Captain Curly of the long haul delivery space ship Tulpar, purposefully setting the vessel on a collision course with an asteroid. After crash landing, the ship is compromised while Curly is horrifically maimed and burned in the crash, leaving him unable to speak but still painfully aware of everything around him.

Mouthwashing swaps between Curly's perspective before the crash and first mate/acting captain Jimmy's after. The Tulpar is an incredible environment, strangely homey before the crash despite the omnipresent motivational posters from Amazon-esque employer Pony Express. The Tulpar's full of great clutter and character details to make it feel lived-in, and swapping between its pre- and post-crash states helps underline how drastically things are degrading in the present day.

There's nothing supernatural about the horror in *Mouthwashing*, just the brutal fallout of a human drama downstream from capitalism. It's a story about how a life without a future makes someone sour, the small joys and overwhelming horror to be found in shit work, and how even the worst circumstances don't necessarily make one's actions sympathetic or justified. The crew members have all been curdled by the lives they were funnelled into, with the banal cruelty of their employer implied to be itself driven by the continued automation of their industry – unmanned ships don't go crazy and crash themselves into asteroids, after all.

Feels like a scab being ripped off to let loose a firehose of pus

When things go utterly tits up as rescue continues to be a no-show, it feels like a scab being ripped off to let loose a firehose of pus. The ugliness and inhumanity in the later stages of the story were always there, simmering and fermenting, the logical conclusion of people forced to live as processes.

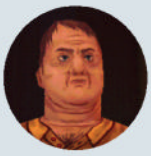
MEET THE CREW

The stranded employees of Pony Express

CURLY
Captain of the Tulpar, well-liked and experienced.

JIMMY
First mate, acting captain after the crash.

ANYA
Ship's nurse saddled with responsibilities beyond her training.



SWANSEA
Embittered 15-year Pony Express employee.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An utterly gruesome narrative horror game about the worst workplace in history

EXPECT TO PAY
$18.95

DEVELOPER
Wrong Organ

PUBLISHER
Critical Reflex

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12600K, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2475490/Mouthwashing/

POINT AND CLICK

The actual gameplay of *Mouthwashing* is less consistent than the story. Most of it goes down smooth, and there are a few strokes of genius that continue to impress me. Then there are some stinker moments that really crapped in my soup – and not like, "This game is supposed to make me feel bad," more like, "This feels like a mistake, or I am frustrated and missing something".

For the most part, *Mouthwashing* has very straightforward problem solving: finding various forms of key (numerical code, isopropyl alcohol, gun) to open various forms of lock (door, REDACTED, REDACTED). Tactile little interactions with the mouse are used to great effect: the way you have to click around to pry open Curly's jaw and feed him painkillers is a brilliant mechanic that's gruesomely echoed in various scenes throughout the game.

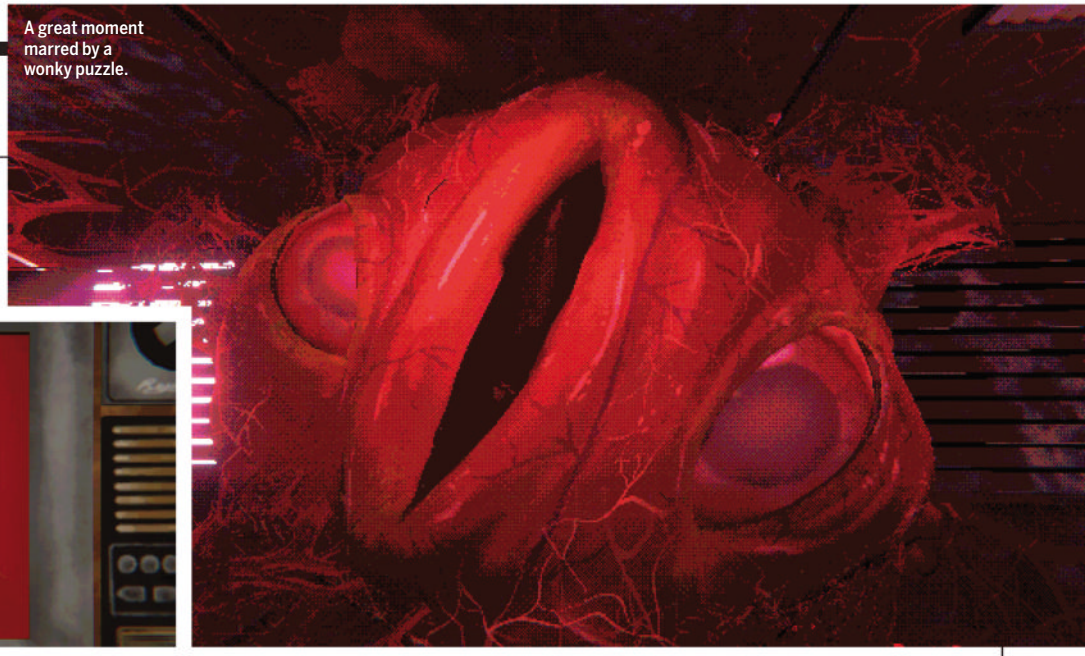
Mouthwashing takes a few stabs at more hands-on gameplay where it mostly falters. There are two puzzles right at the end of the game that are, aesthetically and thematically, absolute heaters: Climactic, shocking moments that really socked me in the gut. But my horror and disgust were undermined by them being fiddly, obtuse little exercises that overstayed their welcome – I'm not proud to say I googled to see what the hell I was supposed to be doing. Meanwhile, I could have done without a particularly laborious stealth sequence partway through, a game of red light green light that goes on for way too long.

But in terms of atmosphere and narrative – the most important parts of a narrative adventure – *Mouthwashing* is a home run. ■

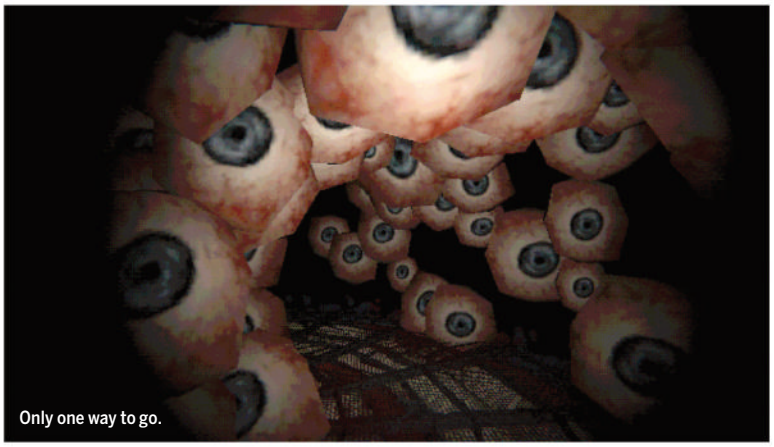
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Mouthwashing is my favourite horror game of recent times, and has one of the best narratives, period.

87



A great moment marred by a wonky puzzle.



Only one way to go.

LEFT: Aww, look how much fun they're having!

BELOW: A crew meeting shortly after the crash.

REEL GOOD

WEBFISHING is a fantastic throwback to old-school chatroom games

By Mollie Taylor

The constant search for nostalgia often ends in disappointment, but *Webfishing* is different. It's managed to capture things I loved so dearly about the bizarre social chatroom games of the 2000s – *Habbo Hotel, IMVU, Gaia Online* – while cultivating the kind of community I never really found in those older romps.

Mere minutes into booting up *Webfishing*, and I knew I was stumbling into something special. It's crunchy-looking in all the right ways, sporting a pixelated, low-polygon art style reminiscent of earlier *Animal Crossing* games. But instead of being the sole human isekai'd into an animal world, I get to be the critter. I can choose from a cat or a sort of wolf-dog hybrid – I go for a cat, of course – before either jumping into an offline lobby or joining up to 11 other players, ready to rod and roll.

Playing alone is fun in its own right. It's good for when I feel like exploring *Webfishing*'s small island with all its nooks and crannies, doodling on the floor with some chalk or simply needing a chat-free fish. But *Webfishing*'s magic comes from throwing my hook out alongside other rod-wielding cats and dogs that are there

I mean, I can press 'G' to meow to my fellow fishers, first of all, which is very satisfying and very important stuff. But *Webfishing*'s focus on casting your line and the quiet serenity between catches is the perfect vessel to start chatting with other folks in the lobby. I'm normally quite an anxious gamer these days – I stick with my pals, and rarely end up engaging in conversations with strangers or people I'm unfamiliar with. Spitting out a sentence in *Webfishing* causes my character to make vague animal garble grumbles, and I found myself making a lot of them.

I can pick a spot, set my character down and stay there for hours

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A crunchy-looking social chatroom game all about big catches

EXPECT TO PAY
$7.50

DEVELOPER
lamedeveloper

PUBLISHER
lamedeveloper

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

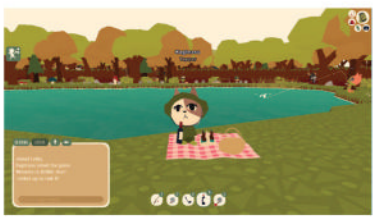
LINK
webfishing.net

FIN-TASTIC

Maybe it's the kind of audience a game like *Webfishing* attracts – the Venn diagram of folk like me who grew up with Nintendo DS-era *Animal Crossing* and spent way too much time in chatroom MMOs – but I've yet to come across a lobby full of players who I couldn't get along with. Another writer at PC Gamer likened *Webfishing* to millennial *Roblox*, and I think that's quite possibly the most accurate descriptor I could give to the game.

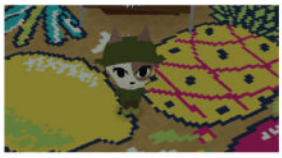
Outside of all the social ongoing, the actual fishing itself is a lovely experience, too. I'm able to cast my line out anywhere I please, which is something I appreciate. No walking around every body of water looking for vaguely fish-shaped silhouettes or perfect rippling circles of aquatic activity. The latter does exist, but only as a way to up the catch rate.

It means I can pick a spot, set my character down and stay there for hours if I wanted to. No fighting with other players for prime catch spots, and no endlessly wandering around. I would regularly find groups all piled together at the ocean dock, peacefully fishing side by side. The act of reeling



ABOVE: You can even buy bottles of wine out of vending machines, which is maybe the only way I would enjoy fishing in real life.

Rule one of *Webfishing*: upon catching a big fish, everyone must type "biiiig fish" in chat.



TOP: Fishing is more fun with friends.

FAR RIGHT: Laying out various props to carve out your own space is one of the smaller joys in this game.

in a fish is relatively simple – wait for a bite, and then a screen pops in where I have to fill a bar while breaking through certain hurdles. Rod upgrades let me deal more hits to each barricade – it might require two or even 20 hits to break – with higher numbers usually meaning better catches.

FUNNEL A FISH

I can then funnel all those fish over to a merchant for cash, which I can use to replenish bait, buy clothes, instruments, drawing chalk, even lottery scratchers and gain access to private islands. The latter is a neat side feature of *Webfishing*, which lets me plop down a flag and teleport to my own instanced spot which I can decorate with furniture. Other people from the lobby can jump in too, and it's a nice way to break up spending time on the same island all the time.

That's been the nicest surprise as I've continued to sink in hours – the game is small in scope, yet I'm still finding new things to do and places to explore. Getting to do that alongside a scoop of nostalgia and I imagine I'll be diving into *Webfishing* for many months to come. ■

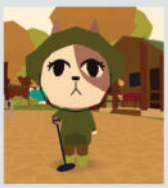
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Webfishing by lamedeveloper is a delightful dose of chatroom nostalgia and a cosy fishing experience.

85

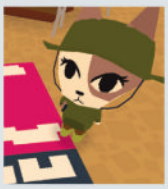
MULTI-HOBBYIST

Beyond the rod in Webfishing



TREASURE HUNTING
Why gamble in the sea when you can gamble in the soil? Whip out the metal detector instead.

LOTTO SCRATCHERS
As a gacha gaming sicko, *Webfishing*'s lotto tickets have become my sole reason for fishing.



FLOOR ARTISTRY
I can't draw to save my life, but the chalk lets people cook up some floor doodles, mandatory phallic drawings included.

MUSICAL PERFORMANCES
Grab a guitar or tambourine and soundtrack everyone else's fishing. Strum out some tunes.

FELINE FINE

Sekiro gets flattened, but no less brilliant, in the sublime NINE SOLS

By Abbie Stone

Six months. That's how long poor Red Candle Games spent trying to come up with a combat move for its debut Metroidvania that was as unique as *Hollow Knight*'s downward slash. Personally, I would have given up after six minutes. Thankfully, the developer was made of more disciplined stuff, and its efforts have paid off magnificently. Because I think *Nine Sols*' swordplay has every Soulslike of recent times beat (yes, even the one about the shadowy tree).

You play as Yi, a feline samurai who looks cute, but is actually as shadily motivated and untrustworthy as my actual cat. After taking a seemingly fatal tumble off a cliff, Yi cashes in one of his nine lives and recovers in a village full of actual humans. But when the village engages in a ridiculously violent ritual, one that's apparently been conceived by someone who's seen Hereditary too many times, Yi abandons it to start exploring a mysterious facility. He's seeking out a wonderfully charismatic series of utter bastards worthy of a *Metal Gear* game, so he can slice them all into ribbons.

Red Candle Games' first major achievement is successfully squashing *Sekiro*'s parry-or-perish combat into two dimensions. Incidentally, if you're not a fan of parrying, then take 90 points off the review score. You can muddle through for a while with the dodge button, and there's a small window either side of a perfect parry where the game takes off health that'll regenerate incredibly slowly (wow, thanks). But these small concessions aren't going to save you for long. Refuse to learn that parry properly, and the game's first boss will absolutely call your bluff, merrily decorating the walls with your insides. Lovely.

HERE COMES THE BOOM

Luckily you have an ace up your sleeve worthy of *Balatro*. *Nine Sols*' masterstroke is that simply pulling off a parry isn't just a reward in itself here. It also fills up your Qi, which Yi uses to slap deadly talismans on his enemies. So long as you keep that slap button held down uninterrupted, the talisman will explode, often a fatal experience for the poor sap you slapped it on. You'll find mods for these too, like one that briefly freezes enemies in place when you talisman-slap them, or offering a more powerful explosion depending on how long you can keep your finger on the trigger.

If you're not a fan of parrying, then take 90 points off the review score

In time-honoured Soulslike tradition, the bosses start off seemingly impossible. But stick with it, and you'll gradually master the parry timing and rhythm of parry-talisman-boom-repeat. When you finally ricochet and detonate your way through a boss battle without taking a single blow, it feels like taking down Ornstein and Smough blindfolded. With a *Guitar Hero* controller. That's not even plugged in.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Sci-fi Metroidvania with sublimely satisfying parry-flavoured combat

EXPECT TO PAY
$43.95

DEVELOPER
Red Candle Games

PUBLISHER
Red Candle Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics

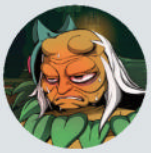
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1809540/Nine_Sols

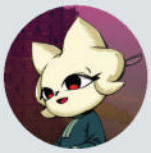
WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

The brilliant companions you'll meet...

SHUANSHUAN
Unbearably cute moppet who's also your biggest cheerleader. Awww!



SHENNONG
Consumes poison, but also produces health bar-extending alcohol. O... K...



WENG
Shuanshuan is about as cute as a dead trout compared to Weng. Sorry!

When you're not repeating a boss fight five million times, you'll find plenty of tight platforming challenges, clever puzzles and well-hidden secrets that make it a pleasure to explore. That this studio has never made a Metroidvania before is just ridiculous. The combat is the main draw, but it also knows how to tell an entertaining story, full of intrigue, humour and terrifying moments worthy of the studio's horror roots. Even its initially slightly tired setting (can we ban the word 'warehouse' from level designers' vocabulary?) gets increasingly more surreal and inspired with each new area.

Nitpicks? Well, it can be a little overly chatty, especially when you get back to your main hub and find every NPC wants to monologue at you. Still, when the dialogue is so consistently entertaining, who cares? Besides, without NPCs, the game wouldn't have Shuanshuan, Yi's surrogate son, and you'll pluck him from my cold dead fingers. Shuanshuan is an adorable human child that Yi saves early on, the beating heart that makes *Nine Sols*' gruesome body horror go down a little easier. He doodles on the walls, writes fan fiction of your adventures and occasionally does something useful. The precious little guy also hero-worships Yi, despite increasing evidence that Yi is far from deserving of such treatment.

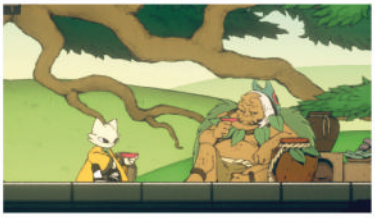
Ah, but I've already said too much. Go find out for yourself how great *Nine Sols* is. Hold out for endlessly delayed games like *Hollow Knight: Silksong* if you must, but I'd highly recommend picking up one of the best games of recent months while you're waiting. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A masterful Metroidvania that builds on *Sekiro*'s combat and tells a great sci-fi story too. Unmissable stuff.

92

Shuanshuan's sweetness is a lovely counterpoint to how much blood you're going to be spilling.



ABOVE: Nothing is as beautiful as this game's comic book-style cutscenes. NOTHING. AT ALL.

BELOW: Boss fights are brilliantly built up, like this surveillance-obsessed one who watches you throughout the level.

RIVALS ASSEMBLE

MARVEL RIVALS' chaotic fun may be short-lived

Elie Gould

It seems like every moment of my spare time nowadays is spent in a hero shooter. When I'm not fighting for my life in *Valorant*, I'm doing the same thing in *Overwatch 2* or with the bots in *Team Fortress 2*. So the last thing I really need is a hero shooter I actually enjoy and will, therefore, carve more time out of my day playing it: enter *Marvel Rivals*.

I didn't expect *Marvel Rivals* to get a grips on me so quickly, but I'm having a good time feeling out the kits of its 33 launch heroes divided into three classes: vanguard, duelist, and strategist (tank, DPS, and support), every one of which also includes unique 'team-up' abilities activated by building the right team composition. I've been maining Hawkeye, which I am ashamed to admit, considering how strong he is right now.

It's always fun to go through the wringer with a new hero shooter, especially at the chaotic beginnings. At first, I found it hard to recognise who was hitting you and where. I spent a lot of my time getting shot in the back by Moon Knight's Ankh, which he can set down and then reflect projectiles off.

Eventually, I was able to pick up on the sound the Ankh made when it reflected darts, and it became second nature to destroy it before trying to run for cover. There are loads of these little learning curves to master, many of which will feel familiar for *Overwatch* vets.

Getting to know each of the eight launch maps is also a lot of fun

There's nothing quite like reflexively sleeping an enemy Scarlet Witch with Mantis before she ults or pushing away a diving Wolverine without a second thought before he can sink his claws into you. There are a lot of intuitive abilities and counters in *Marvel Rivals* – all you have to do is take the time and have the patience to learn them.

HELL'S HEAVEN

Getting to know each of the eight launch maps is also a lot of fun. *Rivals*' maps are one of its most distinctive features, as battlegrounds transform throughout a match, either through dynamic destruction or bespoke map events. It's a good way to shake up a match and can also be used to turn the tide in your favour. If there's a particular spot that a Black Widow player likes to perch on, for example, chances are you can blast it for a few seconds to destroy that vantage point. Unfortunately, the map will build itself back up every now and then, so it's best to be on the lookout for pesky Natasha.

Although I thought I was losing it when walls kept appearing in front of me on Klyntar, it turns out that the map's walls periodically shift around and literally change its blueprint, sorta like the Clockwork Mansion in *Dishonored 2*. This can be a blessing and a curse as it can sometimes cut off long lines of sight, which can protect attacking teams but also means you need to switch up your angles.

There's a great choice of maps right now. None of them seem too familiar, and all of them have enough going on that I'm sure, over time, players will find cool nooks and crannies to exploit and explore. I'm already finding helpful shortcuts or useful hiding spots scattered around the place, which help me escape the clutches of angry enemy heroes.

33'S A CROWD

Starting with 33 heroes is a bold move, considering most other hero shooters begin with a smaller roster that's easier for new players to digest before growing over time. The character select screen is a bit daunting, but the expansive lineup is also great because it means there's something for everyone.

You have your straightforward heroes like Black Widow or Hawkeye, pure aimskill heroes who rely on players landing headshots. Punisher is your beginner-friendly Soldier 76 type with an assault rifle, and there are tanks like Groot and Magneto, who just place shields and gradually wear down the front line.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person hero shooter in which you play as various Marvel heroes in teams of six

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
NetEase Games

PUBLISHER
NetEase Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2767030/Marvel_Rivals

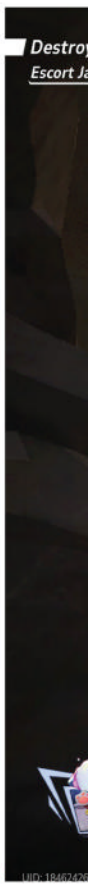
KILLER INSTINCTS

Inside the mind of Jeff the Land Shark

1 CHOMPING
Every Jeff player is looking for the team wipe with their ultimate that can swallow up any player caught in its radius.

2 JUSTICE
Jeff is also an apt healer. With his primary water gun fire, he can heal allies, completing his role as a part of the team.

3 NOTHING
This little guy rarely has a single thought pass through his head, and that's why he looks so happy.



FAR LEFT: Jeff the Land Shark's ultimate.

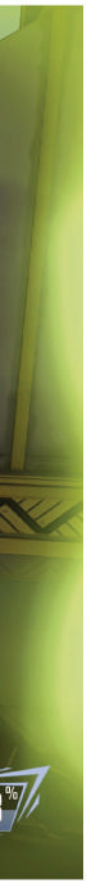
BELOW: Groot and Hulk mid-fight. Green heroes FTW!

RIGHT: Hulk stomping on the ground, as he is wont to do.

BELOW: Jeff the Land Shark sat on Groot's shoulder, healing him.

Then, on the slightly more complicated side, you have your rapid-dive heroes like Iron Fist, Psylocke and Spider-Man. These heroes are a little trickier to get the hang of, but it's high-risk, high reward because I don't think there's anything scarier than a genuinely skilled Spider-Man player.

Marvel Rivals manages to cater to most sections of the hero shooter playerbase with characters that have varying skill ceilings and purposes. You can hide in the back, sniping or healing, or be in the midst of battle, darting around or breaking down walls with brute strength. On the other hand, this massive roster of heroes is also *Marvel Rivals*' undoing: there are loads of completely busted heroes right now. Hawkeye is a one-shot headshot for duelists and strategists, while Jeff the Land Shark is able to gobble up full teams of players and launch himself and all of them off the map in one go. Dominant heroes and instakill gimmicks are considered funny and meme-worthy right now in *Marvel Rivals*' honeymoon stage, but soon graduate to annoyances – talking points from which mobs of players will sharpen their pitchforks. Dr Strange's teamkill teleport tactics are already beginning to wear thin – if I have to watch my team helplessly run off the map one more time, I'm going to seriously lose it.



BALANCING ACT

Balancing a roster of heroes is arguably one of the hardest things a live service hero shooter has to do, and *Marvel Rivals* has made things unnecessarily difficult for itself by starting off with so many instead of drip-feeding players. But arguably, NetEase is more concerned with filling *Marvel Rivals* with loads of fun heroes rather than ones that are more balanced straight out of the gate. It's an unorthodox approach, but one that may work out in the long run.

In a similar vein to unbalanced heroes, there is also an uneven number of heroes in each class. The trouble is in a game that requires an even number of roles – usually two vanguards, two duelists and two strategists, or something similar – if you have twice as many duelists as strategists and vanguards combined, chances are most teams will be made up of duelists.

To make matters worse, the team-up abilities can make an already bad situation painful. There are 15 available right now, all of which give powerful boosts to heroes as long as they have certain heroes in their team. For example, Guardian Revival has Adam Warlock as the activator hero (the trigger character who buffs teammates) and Star-Lord and Mantis as the parties (secondary heroes who benefit from power-ups). This team-up sees Adam Warlock give Star-Lord and Mantis rebirth abilities that see them able to resurrect once after dying.

Manages to cater to most sections of the hero shooter playerbase

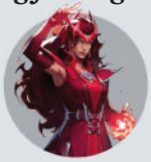
These power-ups are a cool idea, which is pretty fun, but it does put some heroes at a disadvantage. These will change as the seasons progress, so certain heroes won't stay strong forever, but dealing with godly abilities each season may be a bit of a pain. Although I will say the Planet X Pals team-up, which allows Jeff the Land Shark and Rocket Raccoon to ride on Groot's shoulders, is a pretty fantastic little perk. It's also one that I've made use of whenever there is a Groot on my team because it's a great way to get the enemy Iron Fist off your back.

BROKEN HEROES

These characters won't stay strong for long

HAWKEYE
With a one-shot headshot alongside a two-shot body shot for strategists and duelists this hero can be deadly.

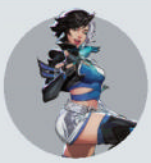
MOON KNIGHT
Siphoning damage from Moon Knight onto enemy players with any aiming required can be tough to beat.



SCARLET WITCH
This hero has an auto-lock ability for her primary fire. The only problem is that the reach of this can be pretty ridiculous.

JEFF
I love Jeff the Land Shark, but his ultimate is so powerful. With the right timing, you can get a team wipe.

IRON FIST
Giving a melee fighter autosnap is a recipe for chaos. I enjoy Iron Fist, but the lock on it is too strong right now.



LUNA SNOW
One of the best strategists, her healing output, speed and ability to damage boost makes her a menace.

SELFISH HEROES

The worst matches I've experienced in *Marvel Rivals* have been when no one else is willing to switch off duelist, so we just get completely rolled by the opposing team, which has a balanced composition of vanguard, duelist and strategist. I can play the strategist Rocket Racoon all I like, but if I'm stuck with a team full of duelists, we're not going to get very far.

This is something that *Overwatch* has struggled with ever since it merged the roles of offensive and defensive damage per second. Since then, tank and support have been something of an afterthought. More people play duelist/DPS roles, but that's not a reason to fill that class with twice as many heroes as vanguard and strategist.

I thought that this headache was something *Marvel Rivals* would want to avoid from the start by creating classes with a similar number of heroes, but it seems that I was wrong. So, unbalanced team composition will probably stick around as a common issue until something like a role queue is added to the game, or the weak give in and assign themselves to vanguard or strategist.

The balancing issues and iffy team composition will hopefully not weigh *Marvel Rivals* down – my pessimistic outlook could just be a weary symptom of years playing *Overwatch 2*. I really hope the developers manage to even out the playing field a bit more so *Marvel Rivals* can carry on seeing the same kind of success that it has had in its launch week. But for now, at least, I'm going to enjoy the chaos of an unbalanced game while it's still fun and reap the benefits of running around as Hawkeye and getting more picks than anyone else, with the prize being my MVP award at the end of the match. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Marvel Rivals **distinguishes itself from other hero shooters but still suffers from the same pitfalls.**

73

A LOVEABLE ROGUELIKE

SHIREN THE WANDERER: THE MYSTERY DUNGEON OF SERPENTCOIL ISLAND has it all

By Kerry Brunskill

If the decades-old *Shiren the Wanderer* series is famous for anything it's for being shockingly unforgiving, and *The Mystery Dungeon of Serpentcoil Island* is no exception to that intimidating rule. Life-saving equipment might not appear at all, and traps could be hiding under any and every inch of the floor. Anyone who falls under these harsh conditions loses everything they were carrying and has to start the randomised dungeon crawl all over again.

The odd thing is it doesn't feel that merciless in practice. The first few floors are so keen on getting even complete newcomers up to speed the tutorials don't just cover simple concepts like attacking and diagonal movement, they even go so far as to explain what the heck a 'mystery dungeon' is anyway. Seasoned spelunkers will find these explanations quick to dismiss, the turn-based action interrupted only for the smallest amount of time possible.

Even with all of this help it can be a lot to take in, which is why the Monster Dojo back in the first village behaves like a highly technical fighting game's training room, allowing players of all levels to brush up on the fundamentals or experiment with new ideas. The pre-made setups teach important tactics, such as luring enemies down a narrow corridor so they can be tackled as one single-file line, and custom sandbox settings allow me to place any monster, trap, or item I've encountered anywhere I like in a blank room.

Just as the game looks like it's coming to a close, it blows wide open

LAB-YRINTH

This learning experience is essential. For all the vast quantities of items and equipment on offer, knowing how to use these items well is always my most useful resource. Matching swords and shields can resonate with each other, stronger when equipped together than their base stats imply. But raw damage is rarely the most interesting thing any weapon can do, there's never a 'best in slot' piece of equipment.

This contrast between tough challenges and encouraging assistance is found everywhere. Although the 31 floors standing between the opening sandy shores and the island's summit can feel like an impossible task at first, the entire adventure is broken up into enjoyably small chunks lasting just a few floors each, and between them I'll visit everywhere from secret ninja villages to relaxing hot springs.

A change of scenery often means a change of enemy too, the monsters always drawn from predetermined pools of specific types based on the area I'm in. I may not know where the exit is or what I'll find, but I do at least have some idea of what's going to try and kill me along the way.

Failing and then trying again more often than not progresses one of the game's various plot threads, often involving colourful bands of amusing pirates, secret princesses and cheering friends. These scenes can unlock significant new features, like the ability to magically transform enemies into edible peach buns, or simply introduce a fun new face to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An irresistibly tough roguelike packed with charm

EXPECT TO PAY
$49.72

DEVELOPER
Spike Chunsoft

PUBLISHER
Spike Chunsoft

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
spike-chunsoft.com/games/shiren-the-wanderer-the-mystery-dungeon-of-serpentcoil-island

TOP: Achievements unlock fun in-game rewards.

Later areas look appropriately intimidating – if you can reach them.

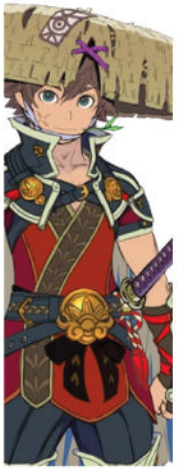
TOP: Casually dropping stunning location shots is very much *Shiren*'s thing.

FAR RIGHT: The secret ingredient? Monsters.

the game's already generous cast of secondary characters.

With all of that mastered, the dungeon eventually falls – and the story continues on, revealing an avalanche of further challenges and new features as it does so. The new labyrinths are often based around a concept or special item, such as clearing a dungeon in the shortest number of steps or stuffing Shiren so full of delicious onigiri he becomes a sumo-sized whirlwind of destruction. Just as the game looks like it's coming to a close, it actually blows wide open – and into something even more inventive than before, too.

Newcomers will find it has all the information they need to learn the basics at their own pace, and a charming story to help keep spirits high when things start to get tough. Longtime fans can use their skills to break through to the NG+ features in mere minutes, and the game is happy to instantly up the challenge to match. At any and every level, this is a flexible and layered adventure packed with rewards, happy to give players a toolbox filled with absurd abilities and let them invent their own path through the game. ■



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Flexible, fun, and ferocious too, this roguelike has more than enough dungeon-diving for everyone.

89

STAYIN' ALIVE

It's really quite simple – don't die

1 This is Shiren. He's incredibly fragile for an experienced adventurer and doesn't like getting hit in the face with explosives one little bit.

2 This is death in gigantic tank-monster form. RUN AWAY! RUN AWAY!

3 Luckily, the map shows the exit in green, so we know where Shiren needs to go.

When in doubt, fire.

RIGHT: Loots is bountiful and meaningful.

FAR RIGHT: Level ups are for stat-buffs only.

BELOW: Every class has its default weapon, but you can supplement them.

TRUST THE PLAN

HALLS OF TORMENT is a beautiful mash-up of Diablo and Vampire Survivors

By Joshua Wolens

Halls of Torment's most obvious difference from its most obvious inspiration is that it expects you to click to attack. No sir, none of that *Vampire Survivors* laxity here. You'll make inputs to hit enemies and you'll like it. At least for the ten seconds or so before you head into the settings menu and turn it off.

But there's a reason *HoT* starts like that: it's a mission statement. Yes, it's saying, you're one little guy against an army of hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of other little guys, and yes, you're sucking up experience gems by the bucketload, but this isn't that other autobattler. This is something different, more deliberate, more considered, and altogether less slot-machiney than its razzle-dazzle forebear.

HELLBOUND

It would be unfair and inaccurate to call *Halls of Torment* derivative. By some mad alchemy, it blends the compulsive loops and endless enemies of *Vampire Survivors* with the gear of *Diablo* and produces something wholly its own.

Despite the writhing masses of sprites, it's a little more thoughtful and conservative than other autobattlers I've played. Your hero has over 20 stats for you to take into account and consider as you massacre your way through dungeons. There's the usual stuff: health, defence, damage, but there's also stuff like piercing, force and a critical hit system composed of multiple substats. Rounds are 30 minutes, so you're not likely to max them all out even if you want to. You have to decide how you're going to spec your little guy over a +1% and +0.2% increments to their myriad stats. And where those kinds of minute increases are barely noticeable in RPGs, the churn of level-ups means they quickly accrue into meaningful differences.

Plus, your buildcrafting is made easier by one of *HoT*'s primary cleavages from *Vampire Survivors*: level ups only give you a chance to buff stats, not to choose new weapons, and you'll get four options to choose from (with opportunities to reroll your options, once you get in far enough). If you want new gear, actual gear, you'll have to slay one of the bosses roaming the levels, but it's not strictly necessary. Filling all your possible weapon slots is a rarity, and it wouldn't be unheard of to make it all the way though a level without ever getting anything on top of your default, class-based weapon.

A little more thoughtful and conservative than other autobattlers

Take my favourite class and probable war criminal: The Exterminator. He's got a flamethrower. Notionally, you could have other weapons, but who cares? My focus when playing him is turning him into a roving, angry Roman candle, melting hordes of enemies into masses of undifferentiated flesh. Is this optimal? Perhaps not. Is this satisfying? Like you wouldn't believe.

That's the handle: the thing that makes *Halls of Torment* different to *Vampire Survivors* and the thing that makes me keep coming back to it is that I feel like I'm following something resembling a plan. *Vampire Survivors* is great, but its experience is one of frantically assembling an ad-hoc toolkit out of whatever its level-up gachas spit at you. Failure is a quirk of the slot machine. In *HoT*? My failure is the failure of my plan or my ability to adhere to it. There's an element of luck, but only an element.

Plus, *Halls of Torment*'s specific aesthetic couldn't be more attuned to my sensibilities as a child of the ARPGs of the late '90s and early 2000s. Give me two honking great orbs representing my health and mana and a protagonist who has no articulating joints in his legs and I'm a happy man, and *HoT* makes me very happy indeed with its lo-fi heroics and diffuse, stygian levels. If I could play this thing on a beige CRT while Rob Zombie screamed in my ears I wouldn't know it wasn't 1999. Actually, wait, I can do that. If anyone needs me, tell them I'm busy for the next... foreseeable future. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Vampire Survivors with forethought and a late-'90s aesthetic

EXPECT TO PAY
$9.99

DEVELOPER
Chasing Carrots

PUBLISHER
Chasing Carrots

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2218750/Halls_of_Torment/

I NEED A HERO

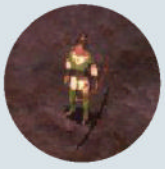
A tasting plate of the Halls' heroes

SWORDSMAN
Has sword. Will hit things with it.

SORCERESS
Shoots lightning. Also floats. Which is more notable?

EXTERMINATOR
Has a flamethrower and no compunction about using it.

WARLOCK
Summons ghosts and sends them to murder foes.



ARCHER
Has a bow. Also, arrows.

BEAST HUNTRESS
Has a dog. De facto best class.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Halls of Torment assembles the parts of *Diablo* and *Vampire Survivors* into something brilliantly all its own.

90

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

You can pick up an audio tour guide, or a miniature black hole.

ART ATTACK

A gallery with a view in THE ZIUM EXPOSITION

I can think of few better places to appreciate art than a mountaintop ringed with walkways and containing a photogrammeterised cat, but such are the upsides when you pluck art out of the physical realm and into a goddamn video game. *The Zium Exposition* is an interactive gallery mixing traditionally flat pictures, animated 3D sculptures and, excitingly, more interactive pieces, which whisk you off to separate worlds for more involved, enclosed experiences.

It's a fascinating blending of worlds. In a regular art gallery, you're expected to slow down and to contemplate, to smell the roses without actually putting your nose up against the glass. However, in a game you expect to stick your nose into every nook and cranny, to prod whatever you want to prod, to leap over barriers just to see if you can plummet to your death. *Zium* embraces this, firstly by including artwork that you can physically step inside, or that turns its head to admire you, or that you can scatter without worrying about paying for breakages. A simple but powerful example of this is Pol Clarissou's Untitled, in which you step into a holographic protest march in support of Palestine.

Then there are the pieces in which you're an active participant. Doll's House by Quinn Spence shrinks you down to the size of a borrower, so you can have a proper gander at a doll's house, while Dog Castle by Nomi and Horatiu Roman gives you a janky dog companion that follows you around. There's also a dog playing the piano here – his name is Mr Woofmantic – which gives you a sense of the surreal comedy that pervades much of this exhibition. Grigory Kurosu's Untitled is probably my favourite interactive exhibit, even though it doesn't actually do anything. It's a ball of rippling dark energy that you can hold in your hand, or set down wherever you like in the gallery. I think I like it because it feels like wielding a miniature black hole.

A ball of rippling dark energy that you can hold in your hand

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An interactive first-person exhibition set in a fictional former quarry

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
The Zium Society

PUBLISHER
The Zium Society

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/ZiumExpo

BLACK HOLE FUN

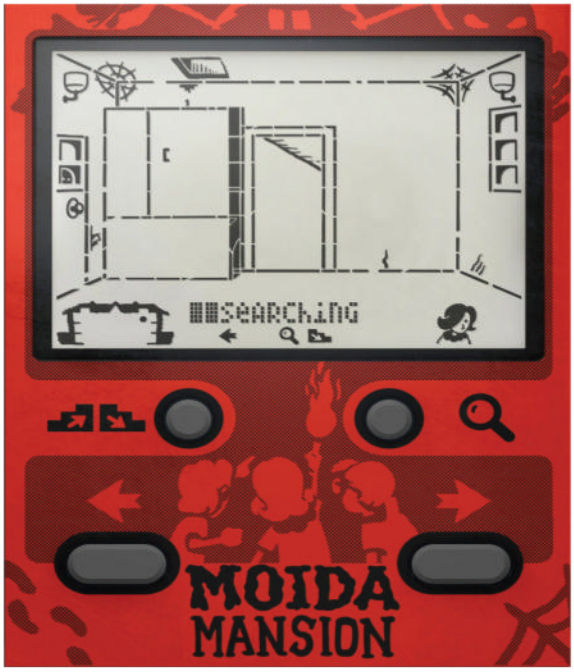
Other pieces in the exhibition transport you to separate environments, such as Michael Berto's Ebbinghouse, in which you wander round a field populated by beautifully hand-drawn characters. Jacob Potterfield's science fiction landscape Barrow Storage is essentially a solo game of capture the flag. Wonders abound in this digital exhibition that makes the most of its format – but my favourite thing has to be the setting itself. It's half Bond villain lair and half City 17: a former mine and quarry that has been transformed into a brutalist structure to house interactive art. When was the last time you visited a museum with its own *Dark Souls*-style shortcut unlock? How preposterous. How exciting. Come on in. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A fascinating space filled with inventive, interactive exhibits. Touching the artwork is very much encouraged here.

82

BELOW: Flashing icons indicate a nearby hiding friend.



MOIDA MYSTERY

LCD is back (again) in Lucas Pope's MOIDA MANSION

Following on from *LCD, Please* – Lucas Pope's painstakingly authentic LCD demake of his game *Papers, Please* – comes a brand new game from Pope that offers more morally straightforward fun. *Moida Mansion* is a game about exploring a mansion and trying to rescue your friends while a monster stalks you.

My main thought while playing was quite how much I would have enjoyed this, if it had existed as a real LCD game. I played a few back in the day and none were as charming, inventive, or so enjoyable to play as this modern throwback. After entering a randomly generated mansion, you're tasked with looking out for clues and searching every room until you find your friends, while a monster shows up like clockwork to hassle you. When it does, you have to flit from room to room until it disappears, at which point you can begin the search again.

The monster itself is a hilarious, Scooby Doo-esque creation, popping up after every search in the most ridiculous places, including empty picture frames and peeping round an open door. There's a funny, cosy vibe that manifests in its every element, from the goofy monster sprites to the beeps that are the sound effects.

But this is not a real LCD game, and it's all the better for it, thanks to a procedurally generated mansion that shuffles the layout, clues and hiding places of your friends every time you play. There's even mention of a secret friend that I haven't been able to locate in any of my playthroughs, suggesting this mansion is even more secret-laden than I had initially thought. ■

83

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Lucas Pope	bit.ly/MoidaMansion

RITE PLACE

Escape a tower in twisty adventure game THE ANCHORITE

You've been locked in a tower for the good of the kingdom in this interactive adventure, which wouldn't feel out of place as an episode of The Twilight Zone. This is another example of a short, twisty story told in the adventure game format – one of the best trends of recent years.

Your initial goal is not to escape, but initially to do just what is asked of you, by a disembodied voice speaking outside your door. There isn't much going on in your three small rooms. You've been illuminating a manuscript, but sometimes your clothes need washing, or you run out of ink, and all these problems require a bit of thought and a spot of item-combining as in the classic adventure games. Over several days – in fact, over several thousand, but you only play through a few of them – your peaceful retreat gets less serene, like that time a skeleton appears outside your window.

I'm not going to reveal precisely where the story goes, but I was excited for the twist (it's immediately obvious there's going to be a twist) and satisfied with the ending when it arrived. It's down to the well-paced storytelling, but also the quality of the artwork, which really sells the nature of the shift with its luxurious pixel art and animation.

There are a lot of free games like *The Anchorite*, usually developed over a couple of weeks or a month for a game jam – check out *Tales from The Outer Zone* if you haven't already. I'd rank this somewhere near the top of the heap, if not quite at the apex: still, it's a great entry in a trend that keeps on spitting out memorable stories. ■

78

BELOW: It's another lovely day in the tower.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Beyond Booleans	bit.ly/TheAnchorite

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

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GROUP TEST
Six top PC controllers reviewed and rated, from budget to premium.

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TECH REPORT
What does AI's role in computer graphics mean for gamers?

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TECH TALES
The rise and fall of the joystick, the PC's forgotten peripheral.

83
INTEL ARC B580
Has Intel finally delivered a challenger to Nvidia and AMD dominance?

Intel Arc B580

Intel's second crack at the gaming GPU market.

It's been a long time coming, but Intel's second-generation Arc GPUs have finally arrived. Codenamed Battlemage, the new Intel Arc B580 looks decidedly less powerful than the existing A750 GPU, never mind the full-fat A770 16GB card.

Details include much-improved mesh and vertex acceleration, along with faster ray tracing. The latter is claimed to be between 1.5 times and 2.1 times faster per XE core. Another big change with Battlemage is the move to native SIMD16 (Single Instruction Multiple Data, 16-wide) instructions, compared to Alchemist's SIMD32 units. Overall, Intel says Battlemage delivers 70 percent more performance per Xe-core.

If you do the math, a 20 Xe-core B580 should behave roughly on the level of a 34 Xe-core Alchemist chip. Of course, the B580 also clocks around 20 percent higher than before. Then there's the memory interface and capacity. Battlemage mixes things up with a 192-bit interface and 12GB of capacity, alongside 456 GB/s of bandwidth, thanks to using higher-clocked GDDR6 memory.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
$469

LINK
intel.com

SPECS
Architecture: Intel Xe2; Xe cores: 20; Clock speed: 2670 MHz; Memory: 12GB GDDR6; Memory bus: 192-bit; Memory bandwidth: 456GB/s; TBP: 190W.

But what about gaming performance? For traditional rasterisation, the B580 clearly comes out ahead of the competition. Against the Nvidia RTX 4060, the incumbent budget-mainstream GPU right now, Arc B580 ends up leading by a comfortable 10 percent at 1440p Ultra – exactly what Intel claimed.

The gap narrows a lot at 1080p, where the 12GB of VRAM isn't such an advantage and the B580 is only three percent faster. AMD's RX 7600 and RX 7600 XT trade blows with the RTX 4060, with the 7600 XT clearly pulling ahead at higher resolutions, thanks to its 16GB of VRAM. The 7600 XT also takes the top spot at 1080p medium, ties the B580 at 1080p ultra, and then falls behind the B580 at 1440p and 4K.

Against the vanilla AMD 7600, Intel gets a clear win. They're the same price, more or less, but Intel's B580 leads by 26 percent at 1080p Ultra settings. That increases to a massive 46 percent at 1440p, and an almost laughable 79 percent lead at 4K, where the 8GB card generally has no business trying that resolution without upscaling.

As for performance in ray-traced games, Arc Battlemage offers some much-needed competition to Nvidia. AMD's RX 7600 and 7600 XT fall well behind on ray tracing performance, and the 8GB card in particular struggles badly. While Nvidia's lowest-tier desktop RTX 4060 card doesn't exactly excel, hobbled by the 8GB VRAM as well, it easily pulls ahead of AMD's offerings.

But Intel's new Arc B580 matches the RTX 4060 at 1080p Medium, and starts pulling away at higher quality settings and resolutions. At 1440p Ultra ray-traced, the B580 is 19 percent faster than an RTX 4060.

If we do have a reservation, it's not actually the drivers per se, but some early indications of heavy CPU overhead.

Testing has shown that the B580 doesn't perform well with older, lower-spec CPUs. That's the case to some extent with any GPU, but the B580 seems particularly prone. If that proves to be a problem Intel can't solve, it will undermine the appeal of the B580. After all, as a budget GPU, it's likely to be paired with older, lower-spec CPUs.

Jarred Walton

	INTEL ARC B580	NVIDIA RTX 4060	AMD RX 7600
ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	80	74	63
BLACK MYTH WUKONG 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	22	22	21
DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	46	36	30
FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2020 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	50	42	44
HOGWARTS LEGACY 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	52	42	43
THE LAST OF US, PART 1 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	45	38	33
STAR WARS: OUTLAWS 1440P ULTRA (FPS)	34	31	26

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Great price for a 12GB card and strong performance
But a CPU overhead problem when paired with low-spec processors.

70

The humble controller is easily overlooked by a PC gamer. We're too distracted by our light-up keyboards and ultralight mice. But it's a good time to start paying attention to. There are a range of new technologies vying to change controllers forever, and the expectation of what's good is changing constantly.

Take the Hall effect, for example. This is popular among gaming keyboards but has become one of the most requested features for controllers over the past couple of years – a request that many manufacturers are keen to meet. Then, when you think the dust has settled, along come TMR sticks that claim to be even better.

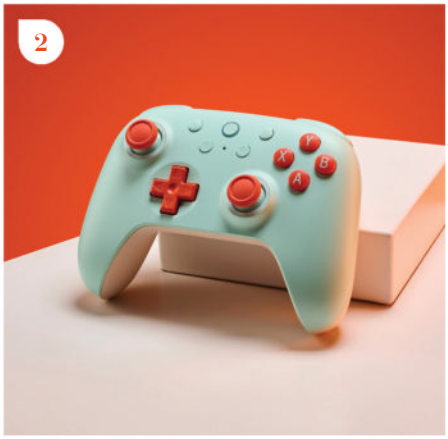
The best things about the controller market, however, are the prices. Unlike gaming keyboards and mice, the controller market is ruled by two mass-produced beasts from Microsoft and Sony. Third-party manufacturers are in a constant battle to bring down prices to meet them and win over potential customers that often prefer to stick to what they know. But as you'll see from our testing, you can get a whole lot more for your money.

GROUP TEST

CONTROLLERS

It's a fiercely competitive market out there for controllers, and it's only just getting started

By Jacob Ridley



V3 Pro

WOLVERINE $349

Better than ever

1 Razer has been trying to grab a slice of the premium controller market for years. You can't blame it for trying – Microsoft has had the market locked down with the illustrious Elite. Yet even the Xbox creator might be beaten at its own game by this pad.

The V3 Pro is off to a good start for the inclusion of Hall effect sticks. These promise a drift-free existence for the duration of their usage. That really matters when you're looking to spend triple-digits on a controller – which you absolutely will be with the V3 Pro. This controller may be expensive but it has a tank-like build and wonderfully clicky switches to justify the cost. The face switches give this controller a tactile edge that speaks to my nerdy soul. They are a little loud for late-night gaming – you're sure to annoy anyone in close proximity. Click, clack, click, clack. The V3 Pro goes one further with Mouse Click rear paddles and triggers. Yep, even the triggers are clicky if you want them to be. Though that's why this controller speaks to the pros, and to us mere mortals too.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Hall effect
- Comfortable
- Snappy switches

SPECS WEIGHT: 281 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** XBOX WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** HALL EFFECT

Ultimate 2C Wireless

8BITDO $39

Budget hero

2 Budget takes on a new meaning with the 8BitDo Ultimate 2C. It feels nothing like the cheap pads of the past and much more like a premium model, and yet still it's more affordable than the Xbox Core Wireless Controller. Since when did budget controllers come with cream of the crop Hall effect sticks? They do now. The Ultimate 2C has two of them in a non-symmetrical layout, ergo the Xbox way, and even the triggers are Hall effect for maximum magnetic action. These all feel great to use, too, and we'd even rate the face buttons better than the Xbox Core controller's. There are two extra shoulder bumpers too.

The overall feel of the 8BitDo is more plasticky than Microsoft's main pad. The D-pad is a little less luxurious, too, though it's really not far off to be honest. As PC users, we also benefit from 8BitDo's standard 2.4 GHz connection over a dongle and Bluetooth as a backup, which means no extra dongles to take up space or whittle down your bank account. Good stuff.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Hall effect
- Wireless
- Extra buttons

SPECS WEIGHT: 200 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ, BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** HALL EFFECT

WILDLY CUSTOMISABLE THANKS TO A HEAP OF SHORTCUT BUTTONS

GROUP TEST

Atom

CRKD **$59**

Adorable

3

The CRKD isn't going to replace your keyboard and mouse in most games. It's a bit too niche for that. Though it is a cleverly compact throwback to a time when controllers didn't have analogue sticks and double denim was more acceptable to wear in public. With just a D-pad, four shoulder buttons, and your usual array of face buttons, you are limited to what you can play with the CRKD Atom. Though to judge it on this alone would be a mistake. After all, it's cute. Its deceivingly tiny form factor means it's portable in such a way that it wouldn't be too weird to carry around in a bag with you at all times. You could store it in your jeans pocket, or perhaps your jeans jacket pocket.

It connects over Bluetooth, which is a higher latency connection than dedicated wireless, though the battery lasts a good ten hours or so. A USB Type-C cable comes to the rescue for truly lighting-fast play, and there's no faff setting this controller up either. More of a gaming accessory than a serious controller, we still had a blast playing 2D platformers on this.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Cute
- Wireless
- Good battery

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 90 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** NO STICKS

Envision Pro

SCUF **$316**

Missing out

4

The Scuf Envision Pro is a lovely controller but in desperate need of a version two. Let's start with the positives, namely a wonderful build quality with an almost soft-touch finish. It oozes quality, figuratively, so far it's been entirely ooze-free in testing. It's also wildly customisable thanks to a heap of shortcut buttons running beneath the analogue sticks. Though you will need iCUE to get the most out of it.

The requirement for some form of iCUE integration is a bit of frustration. I'm all up for my controller having lots of programmable bells and whistles, but when I first got this controller it wasn't possible to even use it without iCUE installed on my PC. You can set it up to function with your preferences baked into the hardware, though you still have to run through iCUE for the initial set-up.

Then there's the lack of Hall effect. Hall effect isn't everything, but on a controller that costs this much and is a modern design it feels like a big miss. Look at the 8BitDo: Hall effect for a fraction of the price of the Scuf. The Scuf is far superior in many ways.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great feel
- Lots of customisation
- No Hall effect

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 241 - 285 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** POTENTIOMETER

GROUP TEST

A FANTASTIC CONTROLLER FOR THE MONEY

MAGNETIC STICKS EXPLAINED

Analogue sticks traditionally use something called a potentiometer to measure how far a stick moves around in use. These potentiometers are cheap, efficient, and pretty accurate, until they're not. That's the big downside: they eventually wear out, leading to malfunctioning known commonly as stick drift. That's where magnets come to save the day.

Hall effect sticks have fewer parts touching one another, which extends their lifespan. They're much less prone to issues such as stick drift, as it's possible to finely tune their dead zone for optimal performance without leaving large margins in case something should go wrong.

Then there's TMR (tunnel magnetoresistance): a newer technology for controllers that claims both the benefits of Hall effect and lower power demands. It's also said to be more consistent. Though it still has a way to go before it's used widely.

Core Wireless Controller

XBOX **$89**

Standard bearer

5 The Xbox Core Wireless Controller is the best thing about an Xbox in 2024. I'm joking... mostly. It's a fantastic controller for the money, helped along by Microsoft's might and the economies of scale. How can some ma and pa controller company compete? The Xbox pad has a subtly textured finish, responsive sticks, excellent triggers, and it works a treat on PC out of the box. It uses AA batteries, which some won't like, but if you buy a pack of rechargeable batteries you can save on waste in a couple of ways: the batteries last longer and the controller won't need completely replacing when the batteries are dead for good. The biggest downside is the specialised Xbox Wireless dongle. It's like any other 2.4 GHz connection dongle, except Microsoft makes you pay extra for it rather than bundling it in the box. It's much better to play over 2.4 GHz for the lowest latency, though you can always opt for Bluetooth if you want to save the cash. Though if you're planning on that, why not just buy a better budget pad from the get-go?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Great value
- Solid build
- Extra dongle required

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 280 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ (WITH DONGLE), USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** POTENTIOMETER

Cyclone 2

GAMESIR **$75**

All the stuff

6 The Gamesir Cyclone 2 comes with TMR sticks. That stands for tunnel magnetoresistance. Much like traditional Hall effect sticks they harness the power of magnets for a more reliable function, no stick drift and a longer life. Though it's also said that TMR is more efficient and consistent than Hall effect. All of which is good news for a controller biz looking for the Next Big Thing.

Though the GameSir isn't just a TMR controller. It also has Hall effect triggers – it's a bit of a hybrid. That means it's supremely snappy and customisable, with a switch on the rear to adjust the triggers into 'hair trigger' mode.

The Cyclone 2 is just so gosh darned affordable that it makes you wonder about controllers that have half the features for the same money. It even has a charging stand. Admittedly, the Gamesir has some cheaper-looking materials to it, but that's somewhat excusable with the entire package taken into account. By any rate, I think we'll see more TMR controllers headed our way in the future.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- TMR sticks
- Gyro
- Rear buttons

SPECS **WEIGHT:** 299 G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4 GHZ, BLUETOOTH, USB TYPE-C / **STICK TYPE:** TMR

Pictured: *Black Ops 6* when you turn all the upscaling off.

GREEN AI'D MONSTER

Jensen Huang says AI's essential for graphics. What does that mean for gamers?

Yes, you're sick of seeing those two particular characters in print. Everyone is, at this point. Nevertheless, Nvidia's increasing focus on artificial intelligence bears some scrutiny. Because when the company that's previously held an historic stranglehold on the computer graphics market suddenly sees all its profits coming from elsewhere, there are going to be consequences.

Asked which use case of AI excited him the most at the Goldman Sachs Communacopia + Technology Conference in San Francisco earlier this year, Nvidia boss Jensen Huang told the audience it was computer graphics.

"We can't do computer graphics any more without artificial intelligence," he said. "We compute one pixel, we infer the other 32. I mean, it's incredible... And so we hallucinate, if you will, the other 32, and it looks temporally stable, it looks photorealistic, and the image quality is incredible, the performance is incredible."

Of course, he would say that. Despite record profits from hardware sales used to build AI data centres accounting for the majority of Nvidia's business this financial year, it is still a company whose foundations are in computer graphics. It's a bit like asking an optician why he's excited about AI and being surprised when he tells you it's making glasses.

But Huang's words are all the more meaningful, because they're backed up by years of action on Nvidia's part. The most exciting developments to come out of the company over the last decade have all either been powered by neural network AI, or require it to render at an acceptable performance level. Huang's words ring true.

OFF THE SCALE

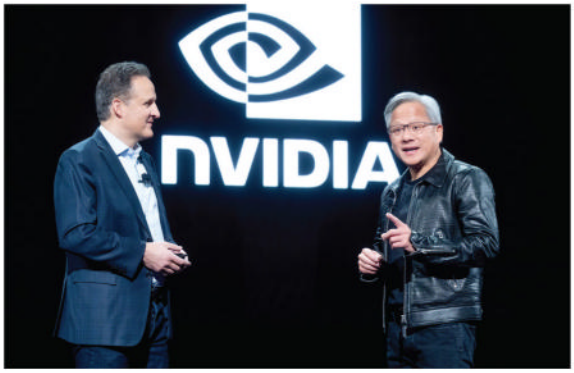
What's especially significant about them is that they imply AI upscaling is, and will continue to be, a necessity as we reach higher fidelity levels. It's not like path tracing, a mathematical basis for modelling more accurate light reflection and refraction so that we see more immersive worlds and developers are empowered to devise new experiences within them. It's the engine room, building the pixels that convey techniques like path tracing.

There's good and bad in there. DLSS 3.5's frame generation is a fine example of how AI's being made use of for what feels almost like magical performance boosts in our games, and DLSS resolution upscaling is already starting to feel as everyday as anti-aliasing, three GPU generations into its lifespan.

But dangers lurk here. Dangers like over-reliance, as we saw with titles like *Remnant 2* in recent memory, whose recommended specs assumed the user would be using upscaling in order to reach smooth performance levels. That

$3.579 trillion

Nvidia's market value has been a wild ride. Even during the crypto mining booms of 2019 and 2021. Its $3.5 trillion market cap is the result of a tech industry gold rush for AI hardware, and Jensen Huang's outfit was ideally positioned to capitalise on it. Its stock value has risen 195% in the space of one year, and the performance of that stock accounts for 25% of the entire S&P 500's gain for the year.



FAR LEFT: Jensen Huang reckons the most exciting use of AI is in computer graphics. Fancy that, eh?

LEFT: At least Intel's increasingly impressive XESS gives us some options about how we upscale.

LEAN ON ME *Four games you already rely on upscaling for*

CYBERPUNK 2077
Let's all finally come clean. None of us are rendering this behemoth natively at 4K.

REMNANT 2
You cheeky sci-fi Soulslike, you, basing your specs on upscaling. Also: too hard.

HELLBLADE II
There's no way to turn off the upscaler in Senua's latest harrowing journey.

STALKER 2
Love the look, love the atmosphere, love the accomplishment. Hate the native framerates.

creates a real divide between users equipped with GPU upscaling solutions and those who aren't. As of Steam's November 2024 hardware survey, the fourth-most used card on the platform is the GeForce GTX 1650, so these aren't edge cases we're talking about who might feel the pinch should more titles start to rely on upscaling in order to hit acceptable framerates.

There's also outright fidelity to consider. However impressive AI frame generation and upscaling are, the images they produce do differ in quality to the equivalent natively rendered image. Perhaps those differences will become so minute that they're imperceptible to the naked eye in time, like 240Hz vs 320Hz refresh rates or the release of a new EA Sports title. But only perhaps.

BUILDING THE PIXELS THAT CONVEY TECHNIQUES LIKE PATH TRACING

DIE-R STRAITS

Trouble is, to do it all natively on-die, manufacturers like Nvidia, AMD, Intel et al would need to force the Moore's Law graph back to that linear diagonal line. Given that it's been slowing since 2002, and that each new die shrink costs those manufacturers a hefty chunk in manufacturing and die yields, there's very little incentive for them to pour money into forcing that reality to manifest itself. And even less so now that they can use AI tools to fake it.

Nvidia has DLSS. Intel has XESS. AMD has FSR and FMF. Microsoft's Auto Super Resolution joined the chat too, all offering variations on the same upscaling and frame-gen solutions that we're told we'll increasingly rely on. They each have their own pros and cons in specific use cases, and encouragingly, Nvidia's rivals don't seem as keen on ringfencing their AI solutions for their own hardware. If we must employ upscaling to reach a playable framerate, it's important that we'll at least have a choice of upscaling options to contrast and compare.

But having that suite of solutions depends, just like the effectiveness of those solutions, on per-game implementation. Intel's second-gen XESS is a mighty impressive bit of code, surpassing AMD's option and going toe-to-to with DLSS in some situations, but at present it's hardly ubiquitous in each new game's graphics options menu. It takes a lot of talented, busy people a lot of time to ensure the game, hardware and AI-driven software layer all work in harmony. In the end, it comes down to how much developers lean on these tools. If we need to use upscaling to hit a stable 120fps at 4K, that feels like an acceptable way to hit what's always been a challenging benchmark through native rendering. If, however, we start to see upscaling become mandatory to hit 1080p60 on a mid-range card, that's a different matter.

Reasons to be sanguine? Well, for as long as graphics card manufacturers are interested in selling new cards, they need to keep devising ways to improve performance on-die. We might have eaten up the DLSS 3.5 ringfencing, but with Nvidia's competitors offering hardware-agnostic options that continue to edge closer in terms of the final image, that nonsense won't fly for much longer. New GPU models need to use the silicon to offer us better performance, otherwise we might as well sell our RTX 4090s, dig out our GTX 970s again and let upscaling do the rest. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

TRIGGER HAPPY PC

The rise and fall of the joystick

How our hands have set in place over time. Our muscles and tendons have grown around the WASD keys like the roots of an old tree, permanently warped into the recesses, little finger instinctively hovering over left shift. The same goes for our controllers, a presence once viewed with suspicion on our desks as an interloper from console shores, but now an essential, instinctual way to reach into a game and impose your will on it.

But there was a time when that domain, the territory where we rested our digits, was up for grabs. Even before mouselook, and the days of warring keyboard control layouts, one peripheral was at the centre of many a setup, and made you feel like a fighter pilot.

There's no consensus on who first coined the term 'joystick', but you can find instances of it as far back as 1909 in the diaries of pilots describing the instruments at their flight schools. No mention of them trying to get one working with *Doom*, though. By 1926 a two-axis joystick had been patented by one CB Mirick, with the intended usage of piloting remote aircraft.

AXIS POWERS

It would be a few more decades before they started turning up in electronic games, though, not least because it would also be a few more decades until electronic games existed. By 1969 Sega had developed a joystick with a trigger to use with arcade game *Missile*, but the Japanese company's hardware owed something to Ralph H Baer, who'd been tinkering with joystick game controllers since 1967. Baer would have his day, though – in 1972 he brought the world's first games console to market. The Magnavox Odyssey cost an eye-watering $99.95 at the time, equivalent to around $730 in current money, and among three types of controllers available for it was our humble joystick.

THE MAGNAVOX ODYSSEY COST AN EYE-WATERING $99.95 AT THE TIME

It's IBM's turn to take a bow next on this historical roll call, because it's credited with the first PC-compatible gaming joystick in 1981. Using the IBM PC's DA-15 port, big blue brought a $55 optional expansion card to market that let you plug in a two-axis, two-button peripheral in beautiful beige and black, with satisfyingly important-looking red buttons.

It's worth pausing to think about what 'games' were during this era. Before Nintendo and Sega brought home consoles truly into the mainstream, gaming at home wasn't much different to gaming in an arcade. While some maverick developers were coding deeper, longform experiences for the Amiga and its ilk, and text adventures were rising in the underground, to most people gaming meant *Pong*, *Pac-Man*, or *Pitfall!*. A joystick was the perfect way to interact with an experience like that. And crucially, there was nothing like the modern long tail of niche genres and enthusiasts to cater for. So many genres in the modern landscape had yet to be devised, and in the arcade-or-GTFO landscape of the early 1980s, it was easy for the joystick to assume the throne as our de facto gaming control method. That began to shift from the mid-1980s into the '90s, when Sega and Nintendo's stratospherically, Earth-swallowingly popular consoles arrived with gamepads in the box, not a joystick. Simultaneously, more of us were buying home computers with keyboards and mice supplied. The imperative to go out and buy a separate peripheral for games was being eroded.

But joysticks would fight back, in a new form. Through the 1990s, as new genres were founded every few minutes, manufacturers like Logitech, Microsoft, Thrustmaster and Saitek embraced the peripherals' new potential as a niche controller for niche experiences. It might not make *Escape from Monkey Island* more fun, but if you're playing a flight sim, a space combat game, or one of those newfangled first-person shooters, have we ever got a phallic lump of plastic to suit your needs.

PHIL IWANIUK
If anyone's looking for a semi-functional Microsoft Sidewinder Pro, roaming freelancer Phil Iwaniuk will do you a great deal. The port pins are only slightly bent.

ART OF THE DEAL *The best uses of a joystick through PC gaming history*

FORMULA ONE GRAND PRIX, 1991
The height of racing simulation in the DOS era, and it felt properly magical with a joystick.

DESCENT, 1995
An FPS played from inside a spaceship. There are no other peripherals on the planet that can do that experience justice.

IL-2 STURMOVIK, 2001
A legendary flight sim that equally legendary PCPP alumnus Tim Stone mentioned in every article for at least a decade.

ELITE DANGEROUS, 2014
Docking your ship in Frontier's 1:1 scale virtual Milky Way is, surprisingly, one of life's great joys.

HOTAS TO GO

There was one more innovation that would extend the joystick's time in the sun. In 1997, Immersion Corporation developed a joystick with haptic force feedback, a feature quickly proliferated by all the aforementioned big names.

But the shift towards mouse and keyboard gaming was impossible to counter. Mice were getting comfier, more precise, and some were even being designed with gaming in mind. Developers were taking cues from early esports players like the way *Quake* supremo Dennis 'Thresh' Fong remapped his controls. It felt better and better to stick with the hardware and mappings right in front of us, to the extent that even those of us who had joysticks watched them gather dust.

Fortunately, they exist today to serve the experiences where they make sense. Flight sims, space flight sims and retro gaming. It might not be your first thought to reach for one when id Software's next game drops, But such is the nature of PC gaming, a broad church of almost infinite experiences, that an icon of gaming past still has its place on our desktop. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: *Midtown Madness* arrived just before force feedback wheels became affordable. Ergo: WASD or stick.

BELOW: Once it sat at the centre of any gaming setup. Now it sits in a museum.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"The more you find out about your companions, the worse it gets"

I've finally boarded the Tulpar spaceship and tried out **MOUTHWASHING**

I was told that the best way to approach Wrong Organ's first-person retro-horror game *Mouthwashing* was to know absolutely nothing about it. Sadly, despite my best efforts, I was unable to avoid some small tidbits of information. This didn't ruin my experience, but it did rob me of some amazing plot twists.

Mouthwashing's nonlinear story means that you begin in the middle of the narrative, at a critical turning point, when everything begins to go wrong. Sitting in the cockpit of the Tulpar, a cargo spaceship, an alert pops up on the screen telling me to shift course right to avoid an oncoming asteroid, but I turn left straight into the massive space rock. There's yelling, fire, and a ton of protective foam, which patches up all the holes I've put in the hull – not my finest moment.

ELIE GOULD

THIS MONTH
Learned the difference between left and right.

ALSO PLAYED
Overwatch 2, *Deadlock*, *Valorant*

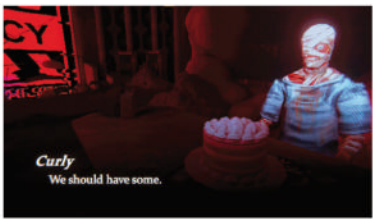
YES, THIS HURTS

After this, the narrative flips between before and after the crash. Prior to the accident, you play as Captain Curly and slowly discover why and how your usually sturdy ship and crew crumbled beneath you. After the crash, you change roles to play vice-captain Jimmy, who's tasked with keeping the ship and crew in one piece while also reflecting on what went wrong in the lead-up to the crash. Piecing this puzzle together takes most of the two-and-a-half hours of game time, but it's certainly worth the wait.

TOP: Curly hooked up to pipes and X-ray machines.

Mouthwashing is something of a masterclass in how to tell a scary story. Instead of relying on cheap jump scares or constant chase scenes and bloody fights, it uses its narrative structure to make you feel uneasy and keep you in the dark. I've always thought that the worst part of horror games is the unknown. Maybe you don't know what monster is chasing you, or you're unsure of where you are. But in *Mouthwashing*, you don't

SOMETHING OF A MASTERCLASS IN HOW TO TELL A SCARY STORY



The crew gathers to celebrate Curly's birthday.

know who to trust or what the truth is. Not being able to trust the people you're stuck with on a broken spaceship endlessly floating through a void is chilling, and the more you find out about your companions, the worse it gets.

I was so sure that when everything went sideways, the person I'd have to be most wary of was Swansea – an engineer with a bad drinking problem and an even worse temper. Despite staying grumpy throughout most of the story, you ultimately find out that he's not the monster you thought he was. No, he's just a broken man who's had a hard life and regrets failing to protect the people who deserve it, like Anya and his apprentice Daisuke, but not you – you don't deserve protection.

By the end, it becomes clear that the character you play, Jimmy, is the real antagonist of this horror story. All your running around post-crash trying to fix everything is some deluded attempt to wash your hands of trying to kill yourself and your crew during a temper tantrum. It's a neat crescendo to finish on and made all the better, considering the last few moments in *Mouthwashing* involve you getting front-row seats to Jimmy's comeuppance. ■

Indy spotting the latest issue of PC PowerPlay.

"Where's that blasted cat?!"

Feline fine in INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Punched Blackshirts, whipped lemons.

ALSO PLAYED
STALKER 2: Heart of Chornobyl, *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora*

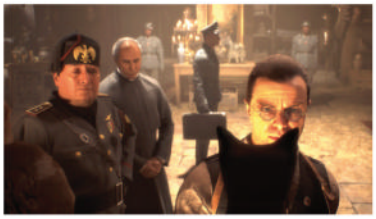
The cat I've been looking for is tantalisingly close. I've been on its trail for ages and, if I can only go eyes-on with it, then I'm going to really take Indy's adventure to the next level. No, I'm not talking about the main plot MacGuffin that kickstarts a globe-trotting romp in *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*, one where he needs to track down a stolen cat mummy, but instead the cutesy side-quest in the game's Vatican hub world where you need to find and photograph cats. Yes, Indy has 100 percent got his priorities straight here.

I know the cat is close as I can hear its plaintive meowing, which at this stage of frustrated non-finding is definitely taunting Indy. I literally find myself saying, "Where's that blasted cat?!" as I search. I've only got a few cats left to photograph, though, and when a game gives me this sort of 'hey buddy, why don't you take a break from the hard work of questing with some of this chilled-out collect 'em up fayre', I've got a tendency to lap it up. I mean, look, there's only so much fist fighting in the Blackshirts' underground boxing club that a middle-aged man like me/Indy can do without a break, OK?

CAMERA OBSCURA

And photographing cats in the bright confines of the Vatican is a nice break from chasing Indy's MacGuffin here, as so far it has taken me and my fellow companion on this grand adventure, Gina Lombardi, into a ton of dark rooms. Dark rooms for dark deeds, sure, but also dark rooms for some great old-fashioned puzzle solving. In chasing this cat mummy, Indy sure is getting the most on-brand cerebral and physical workout he's had since Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Pendulums swing, levers clunk into place when pulled, chains rattle as gates and more ascend and descend, crumbling platforms are jumped between, and whips are swung on through stone-clad corridors, tombs and chambers. This is Indiana Jones done 100 percent right.

Oh, and by the way, I do end up finding that cat, but it's not easy. The frisky feline is sat right up high on some Vatican roof tiles, which Indy has to climb up to. Thanks! ■



"You help the necromancer come to terms with his mortality"

The DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD defender has logged on

The YouTube algorithm keeps threatening me with videos about how the new *Dragon Age* is a crime against gamers. I haven't watched any of them, but my recommendations still overflow. However, I've enjoyed most of my time with the game.

JODY MACGREGOR

THIS MONTH
Sent someone to their death and loved it.

ALSO PLAYED
Arctic Eggs, BallisticNG

Not all of it, of course. Like too many BioWare RPGs, *Veilguard* frontloads its worst companions. This time the Carth Onasi you suffer before you're allowed to hang out with the cool kids is Neve, a detective whose schtick is being Sherlock Holmes without deductive grandstanding, drug addiction, or the ability to put emphasis on words. It didn't take long before I met more memorable companions, though – a Grey Warden griffin dad, a surly qunari hyper-focused on dragons, and a necromancer who acts like Vincent Price hosting The Muppet Show.

The locations open up too, more than I was expecting. BioWare promised a more mission-focused structure to contrast the open sprawl of *Inquisition*, and while there are no Hinterlands here I was surprised how many times I returned to an early *Veilguard* zone and found it stuffed with newly accessible loot, puzzles and sidequests.

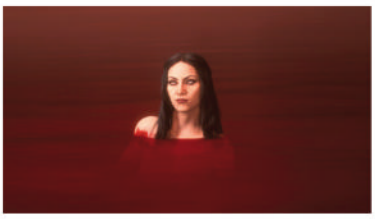
Where *Inquisition* sent you to Orlais to see a Thedas that wasn't defined by filth and barking dogs, *Veilguard* takes place in the northern half of the continent. There are no alienages here. Sure, the main entertainment in Docktown is public hanging and the Venatori use slaves as chairs, but the edgelord dial has been turned way down since *Origins*. The tone of *Veilguard* fluctuates between sentimental coffee-shop fanfic and Blight-tentacle horror as each scene dictates.

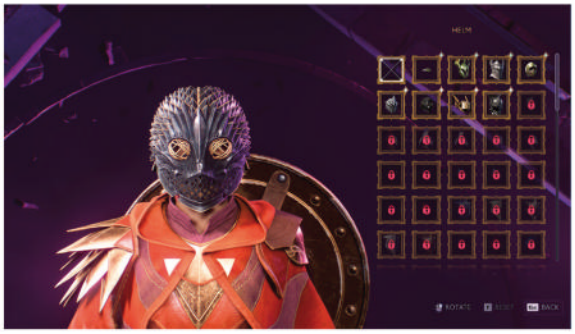
A FINAL SUICIDE MISSION EVEN MORE BRUTAL THAN THE ONE IN MASS EFFECT 2

SUICIDE IS PAINLESS

The former is concentrated in the loyalty quests. You help the necromancer come to terms with his mortality and the assassin with his bloodlust, because despite all the setting's modernisms they haven't invented therapy. Yet the reason you get all kumbaya with your *Veilguard* companions is so they'll be ready to risk their lives in a final suicide mission even more brutal than the one in *Mass Effect 2*. I loved the ending of it and was baffled BioWare didn't repeat the trick in other games. That format makes an ideal climax.

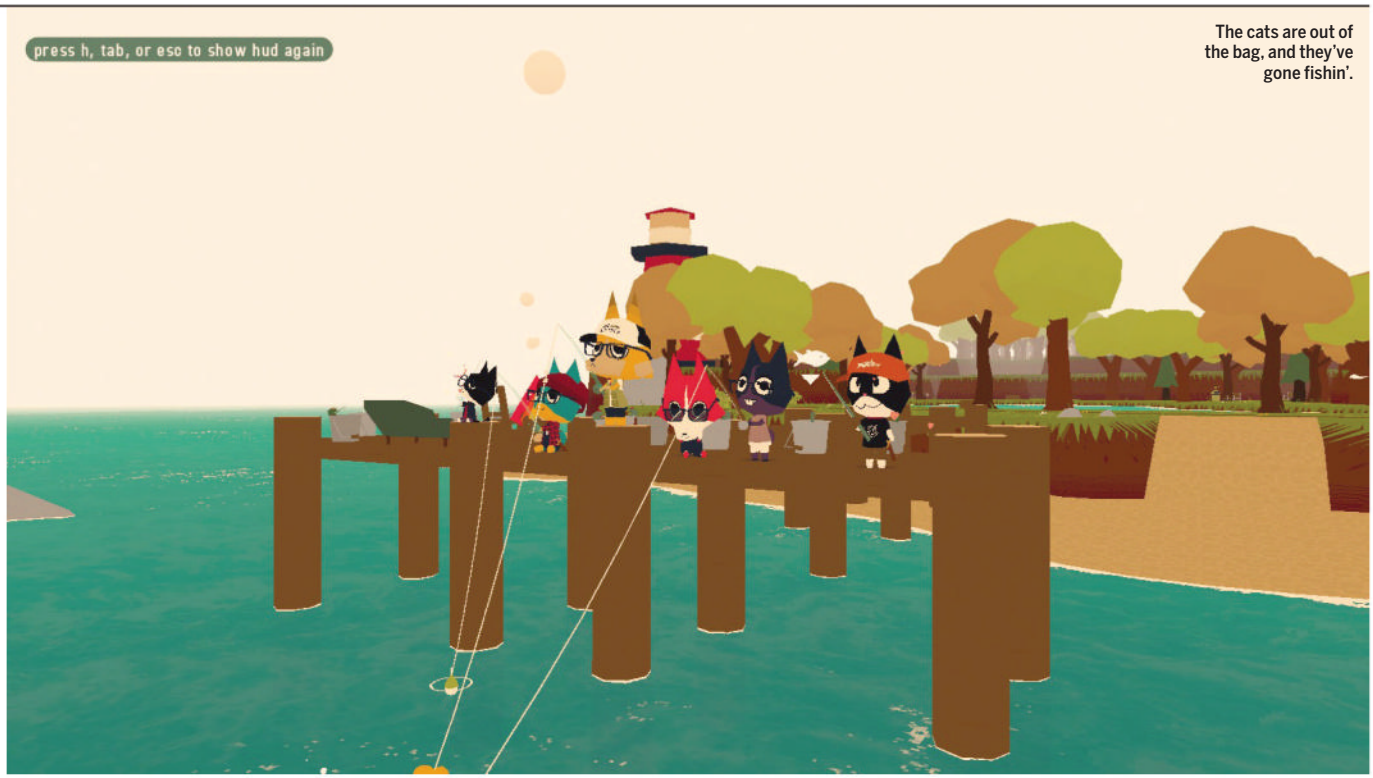
BioWare finally realised a high-pressure friendship exam makes for a more memorable climax than a choice between colour-coded endings, so that's exactly what *Veilguard* builds to. The opening may be rough, but if like me you've been waiting since 2010 for BioWare to do an encore where they play Suicide Mission (Reprise), they heard us stamping at last. The YouTube algorithm may not know what I like, but BioWare finally figured it out. ■





FAR LEFT: "Why spend money on chairs when I have men standing idle?"

BELOW: I love how dumb every single helmet looks.



The cats are out of the bag, and they've gone fishin'.

"I've never felt so inclined to pull up a chair next to a stranger"

WEBFISHING is rapidly filling a hole in my heart I didn't know I had

If you're a millennial like me, you probably grew up in an age of kitschy little browser-based MMOs where the main function was, let's be honest, the chatroom. Games like *Club Penguin* and *Toontown* are relics of a bygone era, not just because what players want has changed, but because the internet itself has changed, too.

If games like *Roblox*, *Club Penguin* and *Toontown* feel like the shutdown of gentrified malls you used to hang out in, *Webfishing* feels like an abandoned warehouse that's been retrofitted out of spite. It's an adorable little fishing game where you go to the lake or the ocean, fish, and turn those fish into dollars.

That cash money can then be used to upgrade your rod, lures, bait and so on – or you could just buy some clothes which, let's be honest, is the main draw. You can also piss all your money away on scratch cards sold by some guy in a shady hut, but what kinda nimrod would do that? Haha.

HARVEY RANDALL

THIS MONTH
The internet is a dead mall, so we created our own.

ALSO PLAYED
Dragon Age: The Veilguard, *Metaphor: Refantazio*

Ha. Don't look at my cat's bank account, it's not important.

There's every chance that *Webfishing*, which has a meaty 24-hour peak of around 20,000 players at the time of writing, continues to scale in popularity and gets ruined once all the jerks move in. Until that moment, though, it's such a relaxing place to be.

VIBES: IMMACULATE

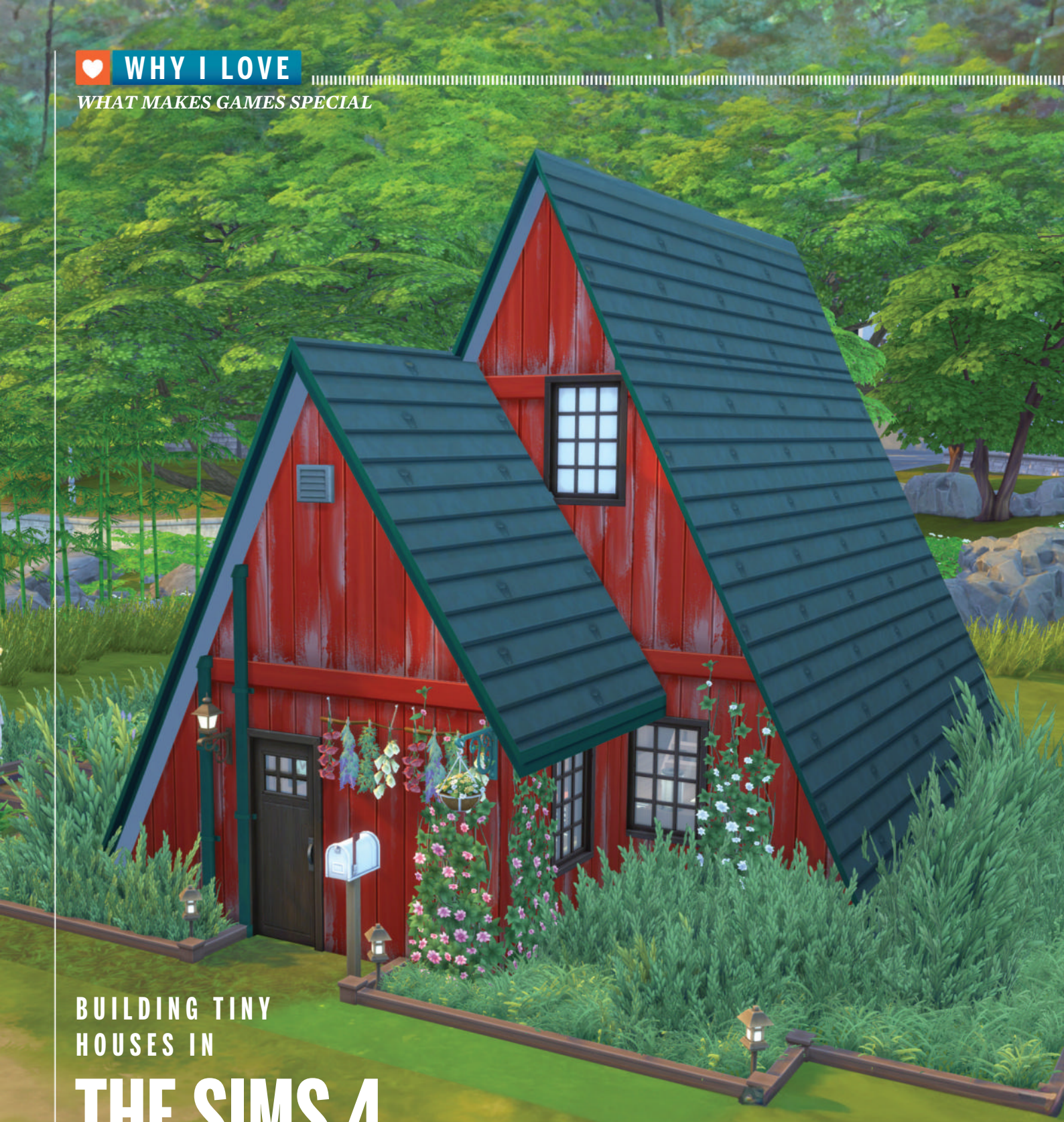
Webfishing is entirely non-competitive, and would be entirely unremarkable if it weren't for the care put into all your little cosmetic items and goobers. Most clothes are tongue-in-cheek options, like MILF T-shirts (that stands for Man I Love Fishing, get your head out the gutter), a 'size matters' hat, and so on.

CASH MONEY CAN THEN BE USED TO UPGRADE YOUR ROD, LURES, BAIT AND SO ON

The game is also explicitly inclusive, with ways to express your queer pride in the form of T-shirts, titles, and caps. When certain morons complained there wasn't straight representation, the creators added a "straight" title for 9,999 fish dollars, air quotes included.

I could wax lyrical about how the game's mechanics are moreish, but it's really the vibe that's the best part about *Webfishing*. In a MMO market full of theme park dungeons and over stimulating activities, basic social interaction flies out the window – but the main appeal of *Webfishing* is that it's just a nice place to chat.

I've never felt so inclined to pull up a chair next to a stranger and just have a relaxed conversation about nothing. Which, in our isolating and scary age, has filled a hole in my heart I didn't know existed. ■

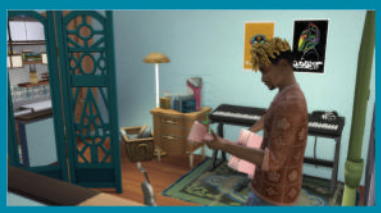


BUILDING TINY HOUSES IN

THE SIMS 4

Compact living is still the game's best self-imposed puzzle. *By Lauren Morton*

LEFT: My three-metre flat barely works, but it was a fun visual puzzle to solve.



The pinnacle of fun in *The Sims* when I was a child was building a monstrosity of mansion that took up an entire suburban lot and running out of ideas for what kinds of rooms to put in them. Mansions have rooms entirely dedicated to a single grand piano, right? Nowadays in *The Sims 4*, my ambitions are significantly smaller, but no less of a challenge. Building tiny homes is now my favourite pastime in *The Sims 4*.

The Tiny Living stuff pack for the *Sims 4* first launched in 2020 and though the pack itself was small – with only 36 Build Mode objects and 32 new Create-A-Sim items – it had a huge impact. It formalised and popularised a niche way to build by giving bonuses for attempting to build houses of different sizes. A micro home, which can only be 32 enclosed tiles, gives all sorts of buffs like reduced household bills, increased skill gain, and other perks. Tiny homes, which are 64 tiles, and small homes which are 100, also give small boosts to household efficiency.

But I'm not a Live Mode player, I'm just here to build. The best way to find the fun in a game you've already put hundreds of hours into is to impose new little challenges on yourself, and tiny houses are just my kind of challenge. Fitting everything a Sim needs – a bedroom, bathroom, ways to make food, and some source of fun – into only 32 tiles is shockingly difficult but there's a real joy in learning to strategy behind it.

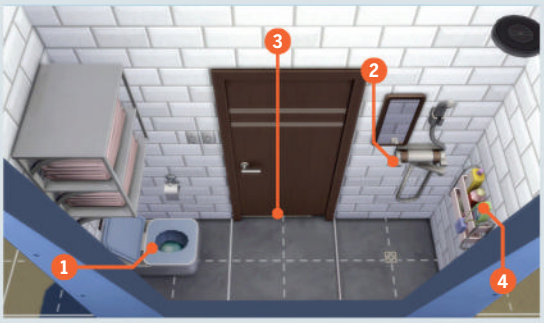
Floor plans are tough enough to come up with from scratch, but they're doubly difficult when I realise that I just don't have the luxury of creating a 3x3 bathroom and instead need to figure out how to fit a bedroom into that same tiny space. And that leaves me just 23 tiles total for a kitchen, bathroom and some suggestion of a living space.

BATH MATH

How to build the tiny toilet

1 With the bb.moveobjects cheat on, your sim can use a toilet even when technically overlapping a door.

2 Snowy Escape and Discover University both have wet room-style showers that don't have a shower door.



3 A door in the centre of your 1x3 tile bath gives just enough space for the necessities.

4 Don't forget to decorate the walls with extras like a shower caddy and toilet paper.

CHALLENGED ME TO TURN FLOATING SHELVES INTO A KITCHEN SPACE

The time-honoured bb.movobjects cheat for turning off clipping for objects works wonders in tiny homes where I always want to scooch things just a little closer together. Some *Sims* players are well-practiced in the arcane arts of making a single-tile bathroom by slightly clipping sinks into walls right next to tiny toilets and shower heads. Personally I'm just thrilled when I manage to make a 1x3 tile bathroom that almost looks like a human could use it in real life. Nobody really likes using a hall bathroom where the toilet and sink are duelling on opposite sides of a door, but it does get the job done.

CLUTTERBUG

One of the best bits of a tiny home is how cosy and lived-in they feel. The economy of space invites me to make fun little choices like sticking a laundry basket on the end of a bed or using half walls in a loft as de facto shelf space the way I absolutely would in real life. Cramming tiny homes with clutter is the ultimate cure for my childhood mansion piano problem. No longer do I look at a room and wonder what I could dedicate it to. Instead I'm working out how to make a bedroom do triple duty as an office and living room.

The last challenge remaining in a tiny house build is the inspiration. The internet never fails me though and I've found everything from Reddit to TikTok to be stacked with real life tiny house inspirations to choose from. My latest challenge was replicating a three-metre flat posted by a woman living in Beijing. It was a great little puzzle that challenged me to turn floating shelves into a bootstraped kitchen space while shoving in a functional mini fridge and twin bed.

The thing that keeps me coming back to tiny houses over and over in *Sims 4* is how achievable they feel. I know I'm not the only one to get the building bug one night, start a home, and then never finish it. But I can fiddle with a tiny home just in an evening after work and have something I'm proud of before bed.

I could have been building tiny homes in *Sims 4* since launch, sure, but the Tiny Living pack gave me the inspiration to really commit to the bit. Four years later, I still choose to work on a tiny house almost every time I open the game. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2014	DEVELOPER EA
PUBLISHER EA	LINK ea.com

RIGHT: My most intricate builds are always the tiny ones.

THE PCPP INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will.

"Oh Dicky, this is all so ugly," Carmen replied when I questioned her about Rusty's death. "Oh Rusty, he was such a sweetie. I saw him leave the tavern on his own, but… I should've been there for him, when instead I was just being selfish and looking out for my own happiness!" When I asked Carmen what she meant, the dame clammed up, but said Brody would explain everything.

I caught up with Brody as he sat with Vivienne. They seemed close and, as Vivienne turned to a call from Eddie who was fixing them all another round of drinks, I swore his gaze lingered upon her for just a beat too long. Brody sure could've lifted Rusty into that barrel, but he said he'd been with Carmen at the time of Rusty's death, with them planning to elope and get married in the fall. That meant that everyone, aside from Stanley, had an alibi. But nobody hides the truth from Dick Ray-Tracing.

"This was an intricately plotted, cynical murder," I said, after gathering all the royal council together. "And you might have gotten away with it, too, if it wasn't for one small detail, something you didn't plan for. All evidence points to Stanley being the culprit. And that is indeed what the killer wanted me to believe. Stanley was to take the fall for this, right? But, by pure chance, when Stanley saw Rusty's character, Profion, walking into the Fantasy Crown auction house after Rusty had been murdered, it proved there was more to this case than meets the eye.

"Because Rusty was dead, wasn't he Carmen?" I asked. "As after plying him with booze and then seducing him at the aftershow party, you lured him around the back of the bar and caved his head in with Brody's warhammer. Rusty hadn't, as you said, left the joint on his own, but instead you'd slipped out too, and Brody here had covered for you. You'd been blackmailing him about how he and Vivienne had been having a tryst behind his best friend Eddie's back. That's why Brody said he was with you," I continued. "After killing Rusty, you dumped his body in the barrel."

"You've got it all wrong, Dicky," Carmen tossed out while putting her hand on her heart. "How could I have been killing Rusty if he was clearly playing Fantasy Crown at the same time? It doesn't add up. Plus, what about the warhammer? I don't have it." "I'm glad you asked that, Carmen," I said, before turning. "Because Vivienne has it concealed, don't you?"

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